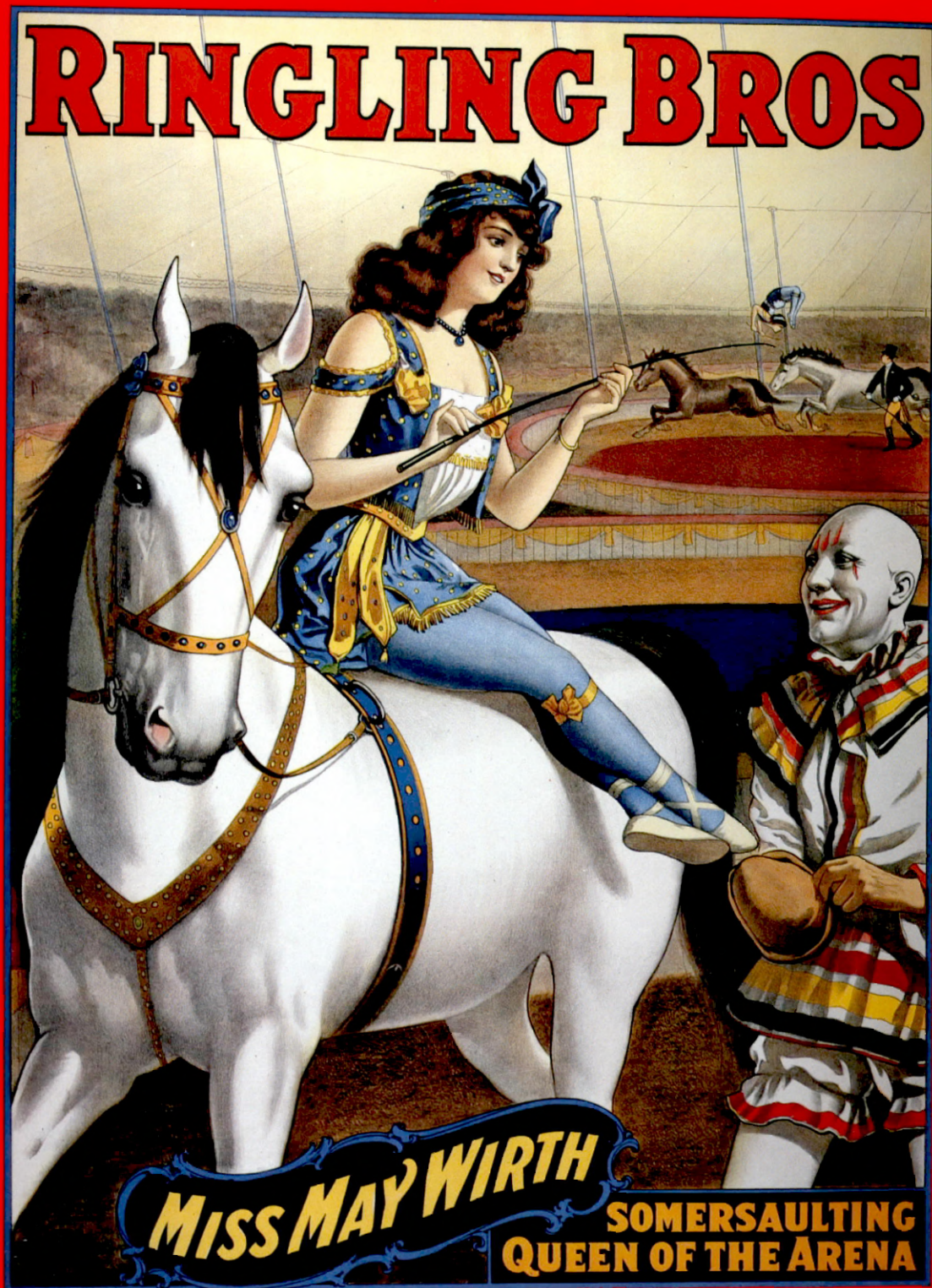


Bandwagon

THE JOURNAL OF
THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

May-June 1990



BANDWAGON

THE JOURNAL OF THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Vol. 34, No. 3

May-June 1990

FRED D. PFENING, JR., EDITOR

Fred D. Pfening III, Managing Editor-Bill Biggerstaff, Production and Graphics
Joseph T. Bradbury, Associate Editor

BANDWAGON, The Journal of the Circus Historical Society (USPS 406-390) (ISSN 0005 4968), is published bi-monthly. Second class postage paid at Columbus, OH. Editorial, advertising and circulation office is located at 2515 Dorset Rd., Columbus, OH 43221. Phone (614) 294-5361. Advertising rates are: Full page \$95.00, half page \$55.00, quarter page \$35.00. Minimum ad is \$20.00. The BANDWAGON is produced using a Macintosh IIcx computer, DesignStudio and TypeStyler software.

Subscription rates, \$17.00 to members and non-members in the United States, \$19.00 per year outside the United States. Single copies \$3.00 plus \$1.00 postage. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to BANDWAGON, 1075 West Fifth Ave., Columbus, OH 43212.

Offices of the Circus Historical Society are located at 1030 Chestnut Blvd., Chesterton, IN 46304.

CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY-John F. Polacek, President, 5980 Lannoo, Detroit, MI 48236; Fred Dahlinger, Jr., Vice President, 1030 Chestnut St, Chesterton, IN 46304; Mrs. Johann W. Dahlinger, Secretary-Treasurer, 1030 Chestnut Blvd., Chesterton, IN 46304.

DIRECTORS: Div. 1-Fred D. Pfening, Jr., 2515 Dorset Rd., Columbus, OH 43221 (Ohio-Mich.-Ind.); Div. 2-Copeland MacAllister, 30 Salem End Rd., #2A, Framingham, MA 01701 (N.H.-Maine-Vt.-Mass.-Ct.-Del.-R.I.); Div. 3-William L. Rhodes, 2528 Taylorsville Rd., Louisville, KY 40205 (N.Y.-N.J.-Pa.-Md.-D.C.-Va.-W. Va.-Ky.); Div. 4-Joseph T. Bradbury, 1453 Ashwoody Ct., N.E., Atlanta, GA 30319 (N.C.-S.C.-Ga.-Ala.-Fla.-Miss.-Tenn.-Ark.-La.); Div. 5-Robert Parkinson, 101 Litchfield La., Baraboo, WI 53913 (Wis.-Ill.-Minn.-Iowa-Mo.); Div. 6-Orin C. King, 5225 SW 20 Terrace #302, Topeka, KS 66604 (N.D.-S.D.-Kan.-Neb.-Okla.-Tex.); Div. 7-Joseph S. Rettinger, P.O. Box 20371, Phoenix, AZ 85036 (Col.-Mont.-Ida.-Wyo.-N.M.-Utah-Nev.-Ariz.); Div. 8-Michael D. Sporrer, 14537 N.E. 40th St. #H202, Bellevue, WA 98007 (Wa.-Ore.-Ca.-Hawaii); Div. 9-Dr. Gordon D. Brown, 7459 Saskatchewan Dr., Edmonton, Alb., Can. 76G-2A5 (All countries outside the United States.)

THIS MONTH'S COVER

May Wirth, whose biography is a feature of this issue, was one of the greatest female bareback riders, and one of the finest artists--male or female--to ever appear in a circus ring. She was one of the very few performers to be featured on posters for the Barnum, Ringling and Ringling-Barnum shows.

The May Wirth lithograph appearing on our cover was used in 1917, the first year she was with the Ringling show. It was printed by the Stobridge Lithograph Company. The original is in the Circus World Museum collection.

SEND DUES PAYMENT

If you have not as yet mailed your dues or subscription payment please send it at once to Mrs. Johann W. Dahlinger, CHS Secretary-Treasurer.

This is the last issue you will receive if payment is not received by July 15, 1990.

NEW MEMBERS

Frank Rawson 3585
24646 Coleford
El Toro, CA 92630

Robert L. Hockensmith 3586
109 Tanglewood Dr.
Frankfort, KY 40601

Michael Fleming 3587
3834 Austell Rd., Suite B
Marietta, GA 30060

Armand R. Riccio 3588
831 New London Rd.
Latham, NY 12110

Rev. D. E. Baier 3589
2514 Lee Blvd.
Lehigh Acres, FL 33971

Bret Wood 3590
308A Eighth Sr,
Jersey City, NJ 07302

Andrew Swan 3591
5629 Canary Dr.
N. Highlands, CA 95660

Robert T. Wagner 3592
929 Harvey Dunn St.
Brookings, SD 57006

Robin W. Howell 3593
c/o Royal American Circus
Box 268
Camberwell
Victoria, Australia 3124

Phil Maton 3594
3 Willis Waye
Winchester, Hants, SO23 7QT, England

David Fagan 3595
P. O. Box 789
Amherst, NH 03031

Bruce A. Campbell 3596
1620 W. 13th St.
Muncie, IN 47302

Charles W. Raby, Jr. 3597
609 American Rd.
Nashville, TN 37209

L. Bruce Moorhouse 3598
5353-C Keepport Dr.
Pittsburgh, PA 15236

Douglas Field 3599
RFD #4, Box 630
Middlebury, VT 05753

Timothy N. Tegge 3600
P. O. Box 2696
Anaheim, CA 92814

REINSTATED

Joel Williams 3455
401 Terrace Blvd.
Valdosta, GA 31602

Charles L. Burns 763
2324 Spear St,
Logansport, IN 46947

AVAILABLE BACK ISSUES OF BANDWAGON

1966-Jan.-Feb.
1967-July-Aug., Sept.-Oct., Nov.-Dec.
1968-All but Jan.-Feb.
1969-Jan.-Feb., July-Aug., Sept.-Oct.
1970-All but July-Aug., Sept.-Oct.
1971-All but May-June.
1972-All available.
1973-All but Jan.-Feb., Nov.-Dec.
1974-1975-All available.
1976-All but Jan.-Feb., Nov.-Dec.
1977-All but Mar.-Ap.
1978-to date All available.

Price is now \$3.00 each.
Add \$1.00 postage one issue,
\$2.00 more than one issue.
Please select substitutes in case
we are out of any of above.

BANDWAGON BACK ISSUES
2515 DORSET RD.
COLUMBUS, OH 43221



Do you have our current "D"
catalog?

If not you are missing out.

We carry the best in "HO" and "O"
Circus Kits, Books, Posters
and collectables.

We've got something for
everybody.

Send \$4.00 to:
CIRCUS STAR SUPPLIES
3037 Grass Valley Hwy.
Auburn, CA 95603

The Howes Circus Story

By Jeanne C. Howes

Read All About It!

They were America's first master showmen before Barnum or Ringling--America's first great circus family. Their adventures fill a panorama of 19th century circus history, from the earliest days of the Big Top to the halcyon days of the Howes Great London Circus.

They played from Canada to Key West, Natucket to California, and throughout England, Scotland, France and Germany. They belonged to the Zoological Institute, trained the Mabies and led them out west, fostered Dan Rice's great popularity, toured the country with Barnum's curiosities while P. T. ran his museum. They brought hippodrome acts to America, braved wild jungles for exotic animals, delighted Queen Victoria, and paraded with the most magnificent tableau wagons ever seen.

Their names are legendary--Nathan A. Howes, the pioneer; Seth B. Howes, the richest showman; with their brothers and cousins and the twins, Egbert and Elbert Howes. 77 pages including notes and pictures.

To order send \$12.00 (Includes postage and handling) to

Jeanne C. Howes
19 Covenant Lane
Weston, CT 06883

CIRCUS COLOSSUS

The finest circus video
ever offered!!!

all color--professionally produced

RBBB Seasons 1939, 41, 42,
43, 44, 45, 48 and misc. 50s

Unloading, setup, backyard, performers and specs.
from the William H. Judd collection of the
New Britain Youth Museum

VHS Only
Price \$49.95

Send to: Sandi Sabia
660 High Mountain Road
Franklin Lakes, NJ 07417

Assembling an historic collection.
Buying one or one hundred.

OLD STOCKS & BONDS & Famous autographs

We would like to purchase stock &
bond certificates (no market value)
from old companies, U.S. & foreign.

Fields of interest include:

Circuses

Traveling Shows

Patent medicines

Mines ANYTHING UNUSUAL!

Railroads

Telegraphs

Worlds Fairs

Zoological Societies

Famous autographs on any
document (e.g. Barnum,
Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley)

Prompt payment assured.
Please contact:

Norrico Inc

65-09 99th Street
Rego Park, NY 11374
Ph: 718-897-3699
Fax: 718-275-3666

May Wirth was born May Emmeline Zinga in Bundaberg, Queensland, Australia on June 6, 1894. She was the first of four children to survive infancy born to Johnny Zinga and Dezeppo Marie Zinga, nee Beaumont. May's father owed his exceptionally dark features to his Mauritian Creole forebears. May's mother, Zinga's second wife, was born in Australia of a father whose birthplace was given as Bayepoor, India, and a London-born mother, possibly of French or Jewish extraction. This rich ethnic mixture accounted for May's own vivid features but led to the mistaken belief perpetuated in Australian circus lore that she was of partly Australian Aboriginal extraction.

May's Family Origins

Johnny Zinga--whose real name was John Edwin Despoges--is supposed to have fled Mauritius with his young brother, Louis, to escape the consequences of a family embezzlement. They were the sons of a Port Louis couple, Louis Arthur Despoges and Louise Noemie Despoges, nee Larcher. Johnny was born there on March 17, 1866, his father's profession being given as "trader." The two boys caught a ship bound for Australia. Whatever the exact reason for their departure from Mauritius, Johnny found it necessary to conceal his tracks. He always gave the French seaport of Marseilles as his birthplace on any official documentation that he filled out in Australia.

The year 1885 saw the Despoges brothers engaged with St. Leon's Circus, then Australia's largest. Their swarthy gypsy-like features earned them the nickname among circus people of "Zinga" from the Italian word for a Gypsy male, Zingaro. They began their show business careers by clowning. Louis soon tired of the traveling that circus life demanded, and departed, but Johnny remained and practiced hard to learn the skills of the circus. Soon Johnny Zinga, as he was now known, became sought after as a tumbler and gymnast by the other leading circuses of the day including in 1889 the large Wirth and Perry circuses.

After returning to Australia late in 1890 from a tour of the Pacific Islands with a small circus, Zinga sought out his old employers, the St. Leons, whose circus was reorganizing after several episodes of family division and financial catastrophe. St. Leon's Circus started out from Melbourne

AN UNBELIEVEABLE LADY BAREBACK RIDER

May Wirth

By Mark St. Leon

Copyright Reserved: Mark St. Leon 1988

for a tour of the provincial districts of Victoria and New South Wales late in 1890. When another circus, the Great Globe Circus, crossed paths with the St. Leon show Zinga caught sight of a young apprentice with the rival show. He terminated his services with the St. Leons and the rival show was only too happy to add the expert gymnast to its bill.

The girl whose merry, twinkling eyes,

May Martin (Wirth) at age 15 as a contortionist. Circus World Museum Collection.



dark hair and features caught Zinga's eye was Dezeppo Marie Beaumont. She was barely sixteen years of age and not too much more than 150 centimeters tall. Her mother had died while Dezeppo was still a babe-in-arms. Her father had reared her on his own and took her with him when he joined the circus as a roustabout. But the father, Gilbert Beaumont, did not live too much longer. Zinga soon persuaded the young girl into betrothal. Beaumont died not long after. At Bega, the couple sought the permission of a justice of the peace to marry in the absence of Dezeppo's parental consent. It was the spring of 1891. Dezeppo grew to love the circus life but Johnny proved to be a brutal, bad tempered husband. The marriage lasted a decade but was not

a happy one.

Zinga was perfecting a balancing ladder act, a performing routine not often seen in a circus at that time, and he began to "break" his wife into the act. Soon after, the proprietors of the Great Globe Circus sold out to two other entrepreneurs, Abell & Klaer, and the Zingas followed the fortunes of these showmen. In the new year of 1892 Abell & Klaer's circus continued into Queensland and, from Rockhampton, it departed Australia for India. The Abell & Klaer Circus returned to Rockhampton two years later, in March 1894, and slowly worked its way down the coast of Australia to the southern capitals. Despite the success Abell & Klaer enjoyed in India and during their progress down the eastern seaboard of Australia, the two showmen were forced to fold their tents for the last time only a few weeks after their opening in Melbourne. The Zingas left and traveled with other circus companies in those years, Woodloch's and later Eroni's. Johnny and Dezeppo's balancing ladder act was a great hit everywhere.

Young May

Little May Zinga grew up with the sounds of the circus echoing in her ears--the cheers of the audience, the sonorous blasts of the circus bands, the sounds of the animals and the shouts of the workingmen. Her home at night was set under a roof of stars as these circuses of the Australia bush crossed the mighty expanse of a continent that was their free domain. Being born into a family of circus performers, May's future world of show business was predestined. She was only three years old when Johnny began to teach her

the basics of tumbling and contortion work.

In 1901 Dezeppo deserted Johnny Zinga with her three youngest children. May, the eldest child and already imbibed with the elementary skills for a career in the circus, was offered by Dezeppo to Zinga's old employers, the Wirth circus family, for adoption. But Rill Wirth recorded in her diary that she and her husband, Jack Martin, adopted May in Melbourne on November 9, 1901. Together, Rill and May took the train to Ballarat to catch up with Wirth's Circus, as the show played there through the provincial districts of Victoria.

May was now no longer one of the poor, struggling family of employed circus performers. She slept, dressed and ate in the compartment of her new set of parents on the Wirth circus train. In Rill's care, May's station in circus life was above the common lot of employed performers and working people. No one was allowed to spank her. May and three children of the Wirth family together received a basic education in the "three R's" for two hours every day. Their tutor was the manager of the circus, George Anderson. Their schoolroom was the dining car of the circus train. But, with the exception of geography, May disdained lessons.

Every summer vacation, Rill's natural daughter, Stella, joined her family's circus wherever it happened to be situated. The two adoptive step sisters became friends and remained close throughout their lives. Stella became the childhood sweetheart and later the wife of Philip St. Leon, Wirth's star rider during the years 1905 to 1908. Stella herself became an accomplished, although not outstanding, circus rider. Her mother taught her "the serpentine dance" on horseback: a beautiful portrayal of a human butterfly which culminated in Stella being lifted from her cantering horse into the air by a single strand of wire, her arms outstretched with make-believe butterfly wings.

The Christchurch, New Zealand engagement provides the first known description of May's circus work in print. The *New Zealand Mail* of March 5, 1902 recorded that: "... the first two performers who are new [to Wirth's Circus] are Master Alexander and little Masinger (sic; ie 'May Zinga'). ... The later, a mere infant, is a contortionist and not withstanding her extreme youth, is very much equal with adult performers ... being regarded as superior to many ..."

In Christchurch also, on March 8, 1902, May made her first appearance on the tight wire.

Like the most adroit of circus performers, bareback riders in particular, May was short but strong. She grew to be

only 150 centimeters tall. Contortion work and tumbling, the earliest and most basic performing skills she acquired, were the basis of the technical precision and artistry she brought to her career as a bareback rider. As a contortionist she learned to twist her body into extraordinary shapes. When, for example, Wirth's Circus toured western Australia by rail for the winter of 1904, the *Kalgoorlie Miner*, the newspaper



May Wirth in 1909 when she was known as May Martin. Circus World Museum collection.

of the State's main gold mining center, observed that: "Clad in spangled silver grey, a young performer rejoicing in the name of Mayazel went through a remarkable contortion act in thoroughly graceful fashion on an elevated staging and concluded a heartily applauded turn by seizing the top of a revolving pillar with her teeth raising her body up and doubling it backwards and spinning around while supported only by the hold of her teeth on the pillar ..."

She also learned to walk backwards and forewords upon the tight wire and to perform feats upon it with no more than a parasol to aid her balance. To graduate to bareback riding, the most demanding, difficult and dangerous of the circus arts. May required a knowledge of most of the other circus performing skills, such as wire walking, trapeze work, dancing and acrobatics.

When Philip Wirth asked May, one afternoon in 1904, if she would like to learn to be a trick rider, the ten-year-old jumped at the invitation. Philip called for one of the circus grooms to bring in Silver

Queen, a fine little pony, creamy colored and dappled, and already broken in as a resin-back. Not only was Silver Queen small, it also possessed a large, broad back upon which May could learn her first bareback tricks. Wirth made her practice splits repeatedly. He taught May elementary tricks such as jerks, flip-flaps and foot-jumps, jumping rapidly up and down from the ground on to the horse's back. When May did foot-jumps, she had to count off a certain number of paces as her horse galloped around the ring. Then she jumped on to its back and off again to the ground. At first, may learned these tricks on the ground. Sacks stuffed with chaff--fresh, finely cut hay--were used to duplicate the length and width of a horse's back. When she could be sure of doing a trick on the ground in this fashion she would then try it on Silver Queen. After a year's practice she could turn "flips" on the back of Silver Queen all the way around the ring while the pony was running its fastest.

John Welby Cooke, the Wirth Circus ringmaster, was also a polished and graceful rider. He began to take over from Philip Wirth and teach may more of the fine points of bareback riding. Cooke worked with May, continually, for three years, and taught her many tricks such as somersaults on horseback and, eventually the very difficult feat known as the feet-to-feet forward somersault. Under Cooke's strict guidance May accomplished the somersault, the only woman ever known to have achieved it. It was this same trick that would secure for May the star billing on the Barnum & Bailey program in 1912.

By 1910 May's work on horseback, over and above her trapeze, contortion and tumbling work, was clearly the most outstanding of her versatile accomplishments. But May, for all her skill as an equestrienne by that time, did not rank highly on the Wirth program. In 1911 the outstanding trapeze troupe, The Flying Jordans, and the ferocious animal acts claimed most of the attention of Australian audiences who came to see Wirth's circus that year. To the *Sydney Morning Herald* of April 3, 1911, in its review of the annual opening of Wirth's Circus, May was simply "a remarkably pretty girl who rode and drove eight ponies and turned somersaults on a cantering grey."

When George Wirth visited the United States in 1910 in search of talent for the next season's production of Wirth's circus, he told John Ringling of the outstanding equestrienne in Australia who could fling a forward somersault on a bareback moving horse. Ringling's interest may have encouraged Rill to take May to America the following year to demonstrate to the American showman what she could do.

An American rider, Ouika Meers, appeared with Wirth's Circus in Australia during the season of 1910 and 1911. Ouika gave Rill the name and address of Josie DeMott, once one of the leading equestriennes in the United States. If Josie had a spare horse she would surely allow May to ride it, Ouika told Rill.

America 1912-1913

Rill took May and Stella and sailed for America on June 9 by the steamer *Makura*. Frank was to follow a few months later. The three women arrived in New York in July of 1911. Once settled into their new surroundings, Rill wrote to Josie DeMott for an appointment as Ouika Meers had suggested.

A reply came promptly in the form of an invitation to the three women to stay with Josie on her estate near the village of Hemstead on Long Island. Josie was retired from active circus riding by this time but she still broke and trained horses for circus work. She had a picturesque circus ring built on the grounds of her beautiful estate that overlooked a man-made lake that brimmed with fish and turtles.

Speed is the keynote of any successful riding act. But speed cannot always be achieved since a ring horse must possess other characteristics even more important to an act's safe and successful execution. A smooth gait is necessary before any other quality. Many a bareback rider has been injured in falling from a horse because of a sudden change of pace or step. Then, after a smooth gait, a resin-back must possess broad hindquarters in order to carry its heavy load. And, in May's case, a horse with short legs was preferable due to her own diminutive proportions. It was not easy to find a horse which satisfies these qualities and was fast as well.

In Josie's circus ring, May practiced on each of the three horses kept stabled in a big barn on a corner of her estate. The moment she stood upon Joe's back she knew that he was the horse for her. Standing tall at sixteen-and-a-half hands and a beautiful dapple grey in complexion, Joe was only six years old. His gait was perfect for May's type of work. His broad back and short legs made him easy to mount. He was fond of women riders and May was no exception. After practicing with Joe for two weeks, May knew she had to have him. Josie knew that May



May, Marizels (Rill) Wirth, Josie DeMott and Stella Wirth at the DeMott estate on Long Island in 1911. Circus World Museum collection.

wanted the horse badly and stuck to her asking price of \$1,000. To May's delight, Rill agreed to pay the "real money" Josie was seeking.

Eventually, Rill was able to get in touch with John Ringling and invite him out to Josie's estate so that he could see May in action. There was a lot of excitement in the days leading up to Ringling's visit. May went to work on Joe to get her act together. Rill made a new outfit for May, a blue satin costume decorated with sequins in the form of flowers. May bobbed her hair and tied it with the big pink ribbon that would become her trademark before her American audience.

On the day of Ringling's visit to Hempstead, May went through each of her routines, gradually, building up from the easiest to the most difficult tricks. Overnight rain had left the ring muddy and slippery. She ignored the inconvenience. The moment arrived for which Ringling had come: May's forward somersault. To her

Illustration of May Wirth used in a 1913 Barnum & Bailey Circus courier. Pfening Archives.



annoyance, May failed at her first attempt and fell from Joe, landing at Ringling's feet. Ringling tried to dissuade her from attempting the trick again in such a bad ring. But the young lady was deaf to his objections and bounded back on Joe. After circling the ring a few more times, she regained her equilibrium on Joe once more and threw another somersault in a forward direction: this time her execution of the trick was perfect.

Joe took exactly twenty-one paces to make each circuit of the ring with May upon his back. It was this regularity of motion, the broad back of the horse rocking up and down as steadily as a rocking chair, that enabled her to perform her stunts with unerring accuracy. The upward motion of the horse's back provided May with the "spring" necessary to execute each somersault, its downward motion with the "cushion" to soften her landing.

It took some persuasion and a large monetary offer but eventually Ringling succeeded in engaging the Wirth Family, as they would be billed, for the 1912 season of the Greatest Show on Earth. Barnum & Bailey opened in New York's Madison Square Garden on Good Friday 1912. John Ringling allowed May the very special honor of appearing in the center ring alone. Activity in the outer two rings closed in order to concentrate the show lights and the gaze of the audience on her performance. Rill took her position in the ring as May's accomplished ringmistress, dressed in an elegant grey and silver evening dress and lending great distinction to the proceedings by her presence.

A writer in the New York *Clipper* wrote: "[May is] an equestrienne in all that the name implies. . . . She is announced as the greatest female rider that ever lived.

Whether this is so or not, we cannot say, as we have not seen all that have gone before in days of yore, when many equestrian feats were performed that are not performed today, but we can and do say that Miss Wirth is the best equestrienne [we have] ever seen."

On the Barnum & Bailey show in 1912 was America's finest trick riders, Orrin Davenport. He later perfected the "back across," a clean somersault from the back of one horse to the back of another

cantering in tandem behind the first. No woman had ever achieved it. May came to Davenport on the circus lot one day to ask him to teach it to her. When May made her one and only return to Australia some years later, the "back across" was a feature of her act. By the end of the season she also accomplished under his guidance the "back-backward," somersault on a single resin-back. To do this May stood on the horse's hindquarters, facing towards its tail. Then, by throwing her body over and making a half-twist, she came out of the turn facing forward as her horse continued its steady canter around the ring. Again, May was the first woman to achieve this trick.

It is difficult to imagine how May might have accomplished these feats without the benefit of suitable performing attire. By 1912 standards of dress for circus bareback riders, her outfit was brief to say the least. Her skirt was only thigh-length, slit at each side to the waist. Photographs of equestrienne contemporaries taken about this time--such as those of Elsie St. Leon, Victoria and Josie DeMott--show skirts that reached to a point just above the knee were still in vogue for lady circus riders.

The applause May Wirth received after her first appearance with Barnum & Bailey in Madison Square Garden in 1913 showed that her sensational riding had not been forgotten by New Yorkers. At the conclusion of the New York stand, as was the custom, the great circus commenced its tour under canvas. The first port-of-call was the New York borough of Brooklyn. When the great spread of canvas was pitched on the lot, at the corner of Wyckoff and Myrtle Avenues, the ground was still cold from the previous winter, as hard as cement. Upon it May was to have the most serious accident of her long riding career.

As the star of the show, its "center ring" attraction, May came on to do her act at ten o'clock the night the circus opened in Brooklyn. She had gone through most of her routines when her spirited finish mare Kitty was brought into the ring so that May could go through her whirlwind finale. Her finale was a "cowgirl" sequence that required her to lay, crossways, across Kitty's back, her head thrown back as she faced into the center of the ring while her weight was supported by a rope-loop stirrup on the horse's outer side through which her right foot was threaded. As Kitty carried her around the ring at a frantic pace, May pointed her left foot high into the air. As the brief sequence came to an end, May began to raise herself from herself from her upside-down position. As she was doing so Kitty was momentarily distracted by a property man who had come out to

prepare the rigging for the act of a wire walker who followed May. Kitty accelerated into a wild, frenzied and uncontrollable dash. May was thrown off balance and slipped to the ground beneath Kitty's swiftly moving legs and was kicked with every forward swing of the mare's hooves.

A horrified crowd of 6,000 people rose to its feet. As May was dragged helplessly



May Wirth at age nineteen in 1913. Pfening Archives.

around the ring, her head was tossed repeatedly against the ring curb, like a wrecking ball. By the time Kitty had circled the ring a few more times, some of the grooms managed to jump into the ring and bring the horse to a stop. May's body was a mass of bruises. There was a deep wound over her right ear. Whether she was dead or merely unconscious nobody could immediately establish. She was rushed to her dressing room.

In the comfort of a New York hotel room May spent several weeks recovering from the accident. Young and healthy, she healed quickly and after a lay-off of a month or so, was ready to resume practice. By the time she was ready to appear in the ring again the show was approaching St. Louis, Missouri for a one week stand. When the May 10, 1913 *Clipper* reported that she was seen in the audience of the Barnum show it was anticipated that she would be riding in the ring before long.

The troupe suddenly left the show at Niagara Falls on July 12, 1913. A surviving pay advance made made out for the sum of \$240, signed by Frank for the

Wirth troupe, records their departure from Barnum & Bailey. The circumstances surrounding the troupe's departure were a little mysterious. *Variety* on July 18, 1913 reported that the Ringling's attempted to cut May's salary by \$100 a week because she had not worked well since the Brooklyn accident. If there was any falling out with the Ringlings, May did not mention it in her hand written memoirs. In fact, four years later she returned to their employment and remained their star equestrienne for a decade after.

May, with Rill, Stella and Frank, vacationed at Josie DeMott's place on Long Island for six weeks. As they rested Rill booked the act on the Keith vaudeville circuit. The Wirth troupe played the Keith houses in the states adjacent New York before opening at the Palace on November 17, 1913, its first appearance in vaudeville in New York City. The New York debut was a "corker" according to the November 22 *Clipper*. And bigger things were shortly to come, in the form of an offer of an engagement in London during the winter of 1913-14 with the Wonder Zoo and Circus of the English impresario Charles B. Cochrane.

Europe 1913-1915

The Wirth troupe sailed from New York on December 6, 1913 on the *Minneapolis*. They were able to put in a few days of rehearsals in London prior to the opening of the Wonder Zoo and Circus on Boxing Day, December 26.

Neither the riding of May nor anything quite like it had been seen in England before. She presented almost exactly the same act at the Olympia as on the Barnum show, the somersault act with the hurricane finish. At the conclusion of their eight week season at Olympia, they shipped for France. The troupe appeared at the Alhambra Theater in Paris during April 1914. From Paris May and her troupe returned to England, the first leg of their journey back to the United States where \$15,000 worth of engagements were awaiting them. But the contracts had to be cancelled when the British authorities refused to allow the Wirth horses to sail. The animals had picked up mange, probably during their appearance at the Olympia, and had to be detained in quarantine. Rill sought work for the group on the English vaudeville circuit. Within a few weeks, in September 1914, war had broken out in Europe.

In spite of the increasingly stringent wartime conditions under which Britain now operated, May and her act continued to receive plenty of work. The British vaudeville circuits paid considerably less than their American counterparts, usually fifty pounds sterling a week for the entire troupe, the equivalent of about \$250, be-

fore deducting the ten percent agent's commission.

When the armies opposing one another on several battlefronts entrenched themselves, the gruesome, four year long stalemate began in earnest. These were still largely horse-powered armies and it was not long before the British military authorities issued an edict making it impossible for horses to be taken out of the country without three months notice being given. Even then, there was no certainty that the horses would be allowed to leave. And prospects for the Wirth troupe's return to the United States began to look dim as well. Many American states had banned livestock from being brought within their boundaries owing to an outbreak of foot and mouth disease. The consequences for circus equestrian acts was obvious. The only circumstances in which the troupe would be able to leave England would be to return to Australia.

The week the troupe played Newcastle, late in April 1915, Rill cabled her brothers in Australia to seek an engagement for the act with Wirth's circus. Starved of imported acts during the wartime conditions the brothers were only too happy to engage the troupe. Rill, May, Stella and Frank returned by way of North America. From San Francisco they shipped by the American mail steamer *Ventura* across the Pacific to Sydney. The steamer rounded the heads of Sydney's beautiful harbor at six o'clock on the morning of September 21, 1915.

Australia 1915-1916

The troupe did not make their first appearance with Wirth's Circus until a week after the show opened in Melbourne on October 23, 1915. The horses had to be quarantined for a time after their separate voyage from England. In addition, the troupe had to rehearse its routines after more than two months of continuous traveling half way around the world. May's own single bareback act still remained the highlight of the performance. What ever accolades she received in the United States and else where, she found her reception in Australia unexpectedly cool.

For Australian audiences there was another act on the Wirth program that season, imported from the United States, which held greater appeal. This was a troupe of performing seals, trained and presented by "Captain" Frank Huling. The Australian public simply "went crazy over those seals," recalled May. The seals were so superbly trained they could even mimic conventional circus acts such as

walking a tight wire and riding a horse, bareback style. Contemporary press accounts of the Wirth tour of 1915-1916 support May's recollections. Repeatedly, Huling's seals were mentioned ahead of the greatest circus bareback rider in the world, if May was lucky enough to receive mention at all.

With the close of the Melbourne stand on November 20, 1915, Wirth's show commenced its annual circuit through Australia and New Zealand under canvas.



The Wirth family, Stella, Phil and May in 1913. Pfening Archives.

Business was good all through New Zealand.

The *Westralia* shipped from Auckland across the Tasman Sea to Sydney on the evening of March 27, 1916 with the Wirth company on board. Although the crossing was expected to take only four days, the captain sent a message ahead by wireless advising of delay due to rough seas. The vessel arrived on Saturday morning April 1 and berthed at No. 6 wharf, Wollomoolloo. The Wirth company was scheduled to open that same evening in the new Hippodrome building in Sydney's Haymarket district. Several English and Japanese artists imported by Wirth disembarked from their ship in Adelaide that morning and the express train that was speeding them to Sydney would not arrive until Sunday morning. Wanting to present a complete program to their first night patrons, the brothers Wirth decided to postpone the opening in Sydney until the following Monday, by which time everyone connected with the show would be on location.

All of the places throughout Australia where she performed during 1915-1916, May received her most generous reception in Sydney. The Wirths plastered the city with posters announcing their cir-

cus and blazoned with the question: "What is Back Across?"

This was the build up for May's riding act, the "back across," the somersault trick that she had learned from Orrin Davenport on Barnum & Bailey. It had not been seen before in Australia.

The blue, gold and white trimming of the interior of the Hippodrome provided a pleasing complement to May's own costume. She wore the shortest of skirts, a pale blue, with an evening bodice of blue satin trimmed with gold, blue silk tights and blue satin shoes. Like a butterfly in flight, her moments before her Hippodrome audiences were sudden and vivid, flitting here and there; alive, alert, leaping to her horse's back from the ground, then somersaulting over and over, leaping to the ground again, then back upon the horse again. All the while her great white charger Joe galloped at his steady, regular pace around the ring. From the roar that could be heard from inside Wirth's Hippodrome, a passer-by on the street might have thought that the circus lions or bears were in the process of consuming their train-

er. But the Sydney patrons were merely calling May on to another somersault where upon she would oblige them once or twice more. Casting bridle and surcingle from Joe she urged him to a full gallop and then leaped upright on his back to nonchalantly turn a few more somersaults upon him. She then rode hanging to the horse's mane, with her chin just softly touching its neck, her dainty heels high in the air over the horse's head. This beautiful exhibition, executed in the most splendid of surroundings, received a generous ovation from the crowded house. It was then time for Wirth's circus to commence its tour of New South Wales under canvas.

In the neutral United States, the circus had to contend with its own privations of wartime. Replacements could not easily be found or imported. The season of 1917 promised to be no better. Expecting once again to be starved of acts of a high order, Charles Ringling cabled Rill with the offer of a return engagement for May and her troupe with the Ringling circus for the season of 1917.

May and her troupe needed a dashing male rider so they would not lose the limelight to Ringlings' other great riding troupe of the era, the Hanneford Family. Even May's feats on horseback were apt to be over shadowed by the hilarious antics of the English comic equestrian, Poo-

dles Hanneford. The obvious choice of May was Philip St. Leon.

With their father Gus, Philip St. Leon, his brothers and a sister ran a small out-back circus known as Gus St. Leon's Great United Circus. The show had been formed only a few years before in 1909, when the St. Leons returned to Australia after troupings several years throughout the United States and Mexico. With a band of fourteen musicians, a troupe of acrobats of the caliber of the Five St. Leons, a principal equestrian of world class in Philip St. Leon, and other attractions it was the best of the family circuses that traveled provincial Australia.

During this extensive tour of her native land, May made good use of her spare time to increase her range of accomplishments. With the Wirth show she usually had only one performance to give each day, compared with two or more each day with Barnum & Bailey.

Coincidentally the ringmaster with Wirth in 1916 was John Welby Cooke, her teacher of earlier years. When the circus was away from the big cities and on the road, Cooke taught May more advanced equestrian feats, for a few hours before each evening's show. One of these was a flip-flap routine on horseback. As Joe galloped around the ring, May would quickly flip to her hands and then back again to her feet, repeating the trick several times.

But perhaps the more extraordinary feat that she learned that year from Cooke was the trick of jumping from the ground onto the horse's back with market baskets strapped around her feet. Cooke had the baskets specially made by a basketmaker to fit May's dainty little feet. Without the use of even the smallest running board, and in spite of her height, May learned to spring straight from the ring to the back of her galloping steed with the cumbersome twenty inch baskets strapped to her feet.

The Wirth show opened in the South Australian capital, Adelaide on July 14, 1916 for a stand of seven nights and two matinees. The completion of the rail link across the Nullarbor Plain was still another year away. The Wirth show was therefore shipped from Adelaide to Western Australia. From the port of Fremante the circus was transported by train the short distance to Perth, the capital of Western Australia. After a brief stand given on the Esplanade at the foot of William Street, the whole show was again put on the train for a tour of the state.

At the conclusion of its Western Australian tour the show sailed for Adelaide on the steamer *Indarra*, departing from Albany on August 27. A return stand was given in Adelaide for eight nights between September 1 and 9. The second last evening of the stay in Adelaide was given over for the enjoyment of returned soldiers, provided they were in uniform. A tour through the country districts of South Australia and Victoria ensued. The circus was now enroute for Melbourne.

Despite the wartime conditions and the

rived there separately a few weeks earlier. The troupe booked an engagement on the Pantages circuit that took them as far as Ogden, Utah and from there they entrained for Chicago in time for the opening of the Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Show.

Return to America

After weeks of preparation on the part of the 1,200 or more employees of the circus, all of them personally supervised by Charles Ringling, the 1917 season was launched on April 7. Despite a poor financial start, the season of 1917 proved to be a highly successful one for the American circus and show business generally. As industry shifted into wartime levels of production employment was maximized and pay checks fattened. The wartime prosperity proved to be a boost to the entertainment industry as well.

A few weeks out of St. Louis, Lillian Leitzel left the sister show, Barnum & Bailey, to join the ranks of the Ringling performers. Although space was at a premium on the circus lot, Leitzel and Wirth were allowed the exceptional privilege of their own private dressing tents. These "rooms" were handsome marquees—spacious and comfortable—erected along side one another. May's was distinguished by its almond brown color. Together, and probably unwittingly, Wirth and Leitzel were beginning to break down some long established circus conventions although the ultimate luxury of their own compartments on the train was still some seasons away.

In contrast to May, Lillian was noted for her fiery temperament. With the two living in such close proximity to one another and rivalling each other for star billing on the Ringling program, tempers could have flared. But both women retained the good sense—somewhat extraordinary for the circus world—not to express jealousy of each other.

Ten thousand people were present in the circus on the first night of the performance in Washington D.C. Among them was President Wilson surrounded by swarms of secret servicemen and local police. The "Chief" received a great ovation from the crowd as he entered the tent. The band stopped playing until he reached his box facing the center ring and then it broke out with the *Star Spangled Banner*. President Wilson enjoyed May's act immensely, especially when she culminated her daring tricks



Stella and May Wirth in the Wirth family compartment on the Ringling Bros. Circus train in 1917. Circus World Museum collection.

wretched weather, the Melbourne stand that opened on Caulfield Cup night October 21, 1916 must have been close to a record for the Wirth show. Things did not go quite so well for May when, on the opening night, she took a nasty fall from the back of her horse.

The newspaper *The Age* reported: "Miss May Martin Wirth did somersaulting and other sensational acts while her steed careered around the ring. It was a magnificent performance which caused cheering more especially as she jumped clean on to the back of the horse and stood erect. Three members of the family leaped on to a horse. While Miss May Martin Wirth was running to make the fourth she slipped and fell, the horse's hind leg trampling her. Miss Wirth was assisted to the side of the ring. Although in pain she stuck to her task and accomplished the feat which she had previously failed to do. The patrons loudly cheered and Miss Wirth was handed a floral tribute."

Early in December Rill, May and Stella sailed from Sydney on the Ventura for San Francisco. Frank and Philip had ar-



This lithograph of May Wirth used in 1920 was a reworked design of the original poster used by Barnum & Bailey and Ringling Bros. Pfening Archives.

by leaping to a standing position on the horse's back with the baskets tied to her feet. Wirth last performed before President Wilson a few years later in a Washington theater when her act was on vaudeville. The President, by then crippled with a stroke, attended the show in a wheelchair that was pushed up a special runway to his box seat at the side of the stage.

In November 1917 a New York impresario, Charles B. Dillingham, engaged May and her troupe for a ten week slot in his review *Cheer Up* at the Hippodrome. When Dillingham closed the deal with the Wirth troupe he already had another big draw on his bill, the famous magician and escape artist Harry Houdini. In order not to divert the public's attention from Houdini, Dillingham deferred the Wirths opening at the Hippodrome until January 14, 1918 and kept their engagement a secret.

Another return season with the Ringlings followed, the troupe opening with the great circus in Chicago, its customary opening date on April 20, 1918. Litzel and Wirth were considered the super features of the show that year.

In the middle of the 1918 season the Ringlings took stock of their situation.

They concluded that the war could last for at least another year. As they deliberated, the railroad companies served notice that they could not continue to handle two big circuses while wartime conditions lasted. This forced a decision which had long been postponed; the amalgamation of the two great shows. The Barnum & Bailey tents folded a month earlier that year and the show went into its winter quarters at Bridgeport, Connecticut, the first their staff knew of impending changes. The Ringling show followed the Barnum show to Bridgeport. The winter was spent in turmoil as the two shows were reorganized into one.

While the Ringlings were solving these problems and many more, the Wirth troupe was able to tour Cuba during the winter of 1918-1919 with the Santos-Artigas circus. May perfected two new stunts during the Cuban tour in time to present at the April, 1919 opening of the combined show in Madison Square Garden. These were a back somersault through a paper hoop and the same stunt with the hoop alight with fire.

The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows opened March 29, 1919. The new circus brought together under one spread of canvas the largest array of circus artists ever seen in one place at one time. Among them were the three finest riding acts in the world: the May

Wirth and her favorite horse Joe on Ringling in 1918. Circus World Museum collection.



Wirth Troupe, the Hannefords and the Davenportes. May and the rest of her troupe were among the first to be allotted their own compartment on the circus train in 1919. This consisted of three quarters of a car, comprising a living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen and a bath, which they furnished to suit themselves. There was even room for a small piano for Stella. Another visible sign of May's status was her Chandler touring car that was carried on the Ringling-Barnum train, one of the very few autos the circus management condescended to carry.

May's Marriage

May had known Frank White since 1907 when he joined Wirth's Circus in Australia. Born in Melbourne on September 20, 1888, the son of William White and Frances White, nee Brown, the young White did a number of jobs around the show, including selling tickets, playing a bass drum in the band and, eventually, landing a role as "Fidem" the clown in May's riding act. He followed the act to America in 1911 and went back to Australia with it in 1915. White played the fashionable role of a "Charlie Chaplin" clown in Wirth's circus during 1915-1916. White's childhood proposal to May was finally accepted by her in 1919, at the end of the season. She and White wed in New York at the Little Church Around the Corner on November 24, Thanksgiving Day. By the time of their marriage, Frank was involved in the booking agency business, even adopting the name "Wirth" for professional purposes. He settled into his career while May continued with her own. Outwardly at least, the couple remained faithful to one another. White understood

that his exuberant spouse had priorities beyond those of wedlock that would necessitate her absence from the marital home for the greater part of each year's circus season.

The Wirth troupe returned to Ringling-Barnum for the 1920 season and headed the riding program when the big show opened in the Garden on March 25. The act now carried ten horses, all trained by May or Philip. Some of them of the broad-backed type, such as Joe, a type going out of fashion for circus equestrian work. There were also a couple of mustangs that could circle the ring at full gallop, while members of the troupe, particularly May, went through their most exciting acrobatic stunts. She now went through thirty tricks in less than nine minutes. The 125 pound May never stopped for wind.

1921-1923 Dates

The Wirths decided not to return to the Ringling-Barnum show for the 1921 season. They had received a salary of \$750 a week with all expenses paid by the show. The Ringlings offered the Australian riders an even higher salary--that was considered the largest ever offered a circus act--to remain with the big show, so loath were the Ringlings to lose their star attraction.

Unknown to the Ringlings, Andrew Downie had shrewdly wooed the act over to his Walter L. Main Circus for a two week period for a guaranteed sum of \$1,000 a week plus a percentage of the weekly take.

The Wirth troupe joined the Main show at the commencement of a two week tour of Long Island. The show started its Long Island sojourn in Hemstead, the village near where Josie DeMott's estate had seen the beginning of May's American career a decade earlier. As Andrew Downie shrewdly predicted people came in droves to see the Australian rider. As much a sensation in Downie's center ring as she was in Ringling's, May was happy with her new found freedom outside "the greatest show on earth." May's troupe was largely responsible for pulling more than \$40,000 into Downie's coffers during the two weeks there. Downie extended the Wirth's contract for a further eight weeks engagement. Rill had to set back three vaudeville dates to take up Downie's offer. In the Main show the Wirths worked in a smaller size ring than with the Ringlings and often the sandy ground on Long Island proved treacherous for both horse and performers.

They closed with Walter L. Main in Vincennes, Indiana on July 21, 1921 and opened at Keith's 81st Street theater in New York just two nights later. This required a long jump between the two points, accomplished by means of a special railroad baggage car to carry the troupe's horses and props. A number of state fair bookings followed before the act's tour on the Orpheum circuit during the winter of 1921-1922 took it as far west as San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The *Clipper* of May 17, 1922 reported the Wirth troupe's imminent opening at London's Coliseum. After a remarkable nine week tour of provincial England, the London impresario, Ber-



Rill, May, Stella and Phil Wirth on the Walter L. Main Circus in 1923. Pfening Archives.

tram Mills offered the act 400 pounds a week to give a return five week Christmas season in London at Olympia, with transportation paid across the Atlantic and back. But the troupe, with Frank Wirth, sailed from London on the *Adriatic* on August 5 without giving Mills a definite answer. It was engaged as a \$1,500 a week extra attraction for Jean Bedini's *Chuckles of 1922*, a vaudeville show that played the Columbia wheel, a New York circuit. This engagement effectively precluded acceptance of the Bertram Mills offer that winter, but Mills was happy

May Wirth and Lillian Leitzel in front of May's dressing top on Ringling-Barnum in 1924. Pfening Archives.



enough to hold the offer over for another year.

The Wirth act headlined the Walter L. Main Circus when the show opened its 1923 season on April 7 in Charlottesville, Virginia and it gave Andrew Downie another solvent season that year. The Ringlings woke up to what they were missing and proceeded delicately to woo their former star rider back to the Greatest Show on Earth. It would take them six months of delicate negotiations by correspondence and conference. Eventually, the *Clipper* of August 17, 1923 announced "Ringlings Sign May Wirth," after the two parties closed a deal for the 1924 season in Robinson, Illinois.

On Ringling-Barnum 1924-1927

The four seasons from 1924 to 1927 were May's last with the Ringling-Barnum show. Lillian Leitzel was there, as were the Codonas, and from 1925, Con Colleano.

When the act opened with the big show in the Garden on March 29, 1924, other equestrians included, acknowledged that May was at the top of her career. Of the special features, May was the last to go on, her act starting at 10:20 p.m. that night.

Later that year May and her husband invested in their own home. Their good fortunes in the entertainment world would at last allow them to enjoy a settled life, at least when they had the time to do so. The *New York Times* of August 31, 1924 reported that their house, designed in an old English style, was under construction in the exclusive New York residential district of Forest Hills. Frank, a keen golfer, knocked off work at three or four each afternoon, came home for a plate of sandwiches before taking in nine or eighteen holes before dinner. Frank had the cellar equipped with its own bar and cash register and presided over lavish parties at the height of Prohibition that saw bathtub gin and bootleg Canadian liquor consumed in gallons.

The Ringling bandmaster for half a century, Merle Evans, recalled May Wirth at the peak of her career when interviewed in Florida in November 1985. His memories of May, spoken in a rich voice, were warm and vivid: "In the early days you use to play quadrilles and schottisches for a riding act, but when I came to the Ringling show in 1919 we played show

tunes [and things like that for her act]. For May's act we did two 'stops' and a 'finish.' She'd do some routines, there'd be a stop and the clowns would do something on the track. Then you'd blow the whistle again and May would do the next routine. We'd blow the whistle again and the clowns would do something. Then for the last thing we'd play a gallop which would always be running and jumping on the horse and all that. At the end of her act, we'd give her a chord on the front track. Then she'd turn around and bow on the back track and we'd give her two more cords. The Wirth family, they worked all the time, they always had plenty of work. Phil did the comedy and was very good but there was nobody who could do the comedy riding act like Poodles Hanneford. He stepped off a horse like nobody's business. May did a solo act in the first part of the show. She could ride, she was something."

During the winter of 1925-1926, between season on the Ringling-Barnum show, the Wirths toured Europe. A brief engagement of the troupe as closing act at the New York Hippodrome prior to sailing for Europe had to be cancelled when May badly bruised herself through a fall at the Franklin Theater. But they sailed from New York on December 5, 1925 and commenced a five-and-a-half week season with the Bertram Mills Circus at London's Olympia on December 21 before going on to the continent. Bertram Mills paid the Wirth troupe the highest salary ever known for an attraction of this nature in England, as well as the transportation of the act from New York and its return. The Flying Codonas appeared on the same bill. After London, there followed a month's engagement at the Wintergraden in Berlin. It was May's first appearance in the German capital. From Germany the troupe sailed on March 5, 1926 for New York.

The Wirth troupe, which had been under the management of Alf T. Wilton, a New York booking agent during the early 1920s. The Wirth & Hamid agency acquired their contract by the time they opened with the Ringling-Barnum show in the Garden in April 1926. *Variety* isolated May, Leitzel and Colleano as the outstanding features that year. May's act was spiced with a "Charleston" that she executed on the bareback of her swift white horse. She had had limited time to rehearse the piece, a difficult one for her horse had to learn to run at a different pace from what it was accustomed. But she went through her entire routine without a miss. The flashing roundouts she executed for her finale were met with thunders of applause. For the appearance of the entire troupe later in the evening's program, Phil dressed up in female cos-



May Wirth doing a "back across," a somersault from one horse to another. Circus World Museum collection.

tume to "ride as a dame," something he had not done since his days in Australia as Senorita Philipina. Another Australian rider Clarry Bruce took over the comedy riding that Phil usually did.

May and the act played the Keith-Albee circuit during the winter of 1926-1927. Their 1927 season on Ringling was the last that the Wirths spent with the show. If the advertisement for Ringlings in *Variety* on April 20, 1927 was any indication, Con Colleano was now its star supreme. May Wirth, Phil and the Wirth family were now placed further down the bill. They were not as high as the fabulous wire walker, nor as high as the Codonas. The downgrading of the Wirth act on the Ringling bill during 1927 may have been an initial cause for dissatisfaction. An order from John Ringling shortly after the huge circus entered its new winter quarters in Sarasota, Florida and began preparations for the 1928 tour probably sealed the Wirths' decision to leave once and for all. The order was to do away with state rooms on the show train, not to mention the separate dressing tents. By eliminating these luxuries, Ringling figured that he could relieve conditions on the crowded circus lot. The star acts did not take kindly to the idea. The Wirths did not stay to argue.

Thereafter May and her troupe switched permanently to playing vaudeville dates, county fairs, indoor circuses and the occasional engagement under canvas with a small circus. May, at thirty-four years of age, still had several more years to give as an active rider. And when the Ringlings opened its 1928 season at the Garden her riding was sorely missed.

Without her charming and energetic presence the equestrian specialties looked remarkably unexceptional.

St. Leon Bros. Circus 1931

During the winter of 1930-1931 Frank Wirth and Philip St. Leon Wirth organized a tented circus using the one ring format commonly used in European circuses. The truck circus was comprised of first class acts headed by May's troupe of riders. The opening date for the circus was set for May 5, 1931 at Bridgeport, Connecticut, coincidentally the old home of the Barnum & Bailey show. The show was named St. Leon Brothers European Circus, Ltd. after Phil St. Leon Wirth's original family name. At that time May Wirth's troupe included the riders Freddy and Ethel Freeman.

The last major engagement for May and her troupe prior to starting out with the St. Leon show had been a two week top billing with the Great European Olympia Circus at the Chicago Stadium. This show was presented by Barnes & Carruthers, Inc., a theatrical agency owned and operated by the Chicago Stadium Corporation. Display number 22 on the program was comprised of bareback riding acts in each of the three rings. In the first ring was the Davenport family which had appeared on Ringling in years gone by. In the third ring was the riding act of the George Hanneford family, a younger brother of Poodles. In the center ring was the Wirth family featuring May Wirth, "the Sweetheart of the Circus."

The Great European Olympia Circus played only two weeks from April 7 to 20, 1931. Although the darkest year of the great depression the Chicago public could nevertheless afford to turn out in huge numbers. The *Chicago Tribune* on April 13 reported that: "More than 86,000 men,

women and children witnessed the Great European Circus at the Chicago Stadium in the four performances given Saturday and yesterday [Sunday]. This is believed to be the largest attendance at any four consecutive circus performances in America. On Saturday afternoon and night 45,000 spectators passed through the turnstiles."

From Chicago May and her troupe headed east to meet up with the St. Leon European Circus. There were twelve displays on the St. Leon program, all of them in the classic, single ring format. Each act was allowed to give its complete routine, there being no doubling or overlapping of acts, thus allowing the twelve acts and an intermission to fill what appears to have been an excellent program of a little over two hours. Display number seven, the last before the intermission featured May's troupe under the billing of the Wirth Family. Much of her old troupe was together again. It included Philip and Stella St. Leon while Rill came out of semi-retirement to act as ringmistress. As well as appearing with the Wirth troupe, the Freemans appeared in their own display in a clowning, acrobatic and chair balancing turn. Performances on the slack wire and tetterboard were given by another Australian group, the Honey Family. Also in the St. Leon performance were Jorgen M. Christian's liberty act, Emil Pallenberg's bears, Jeanette May's aerial rings and the John G. Robinson elephants.

Moving on a fleet of ten trucks the show did fine business on its inaugural tour through New England and Canada during the spring and summer before closing on August 5 in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Many of the acts on the show were committed to engagements during September on county fairs. The show reopened for an autumn indoor tour.

The St. Leon show played upstate New York indoor dates during October and November. The *Billboard* reported that clown Otto Griebeling was working in May's riding act by that time. A final date of the St. Leon show in Schenectady, New York November 9 to 14, 1931 was the last reported location of the show.

The Blue Mask

A new diversion for May was her role in the operetta *The Blue Mask* which opened in Chicago March 27, 1932 at the Grand Opera House. *The Blue Mask* was an adaptation of the Viennese piece *The*

Circus Princess, by Kalman. In this production Guy Robertson played a fair haired Russian prince and cavalry officer who, after being disinherited by a mean old uncle escapes his family for the anonymity of life in a traveling circus. Thanks to the presence of May and her troupe of riders the circus scene presented within the operetta was the real thing. May's two big steeds loped around the ring (with padded hoofs) in the true



Mel Miller and May Wirth at the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, Florida in the early 1970s. Pfening Archives.

manner of the circus arena. The *The Blue Mask* engagement of ended on May 7, 1932.

Retirement

The 1934 tour of the Frank Wirth Circus was the first of several inaugurated as May's public farewell. She could draw crowds on her reputation alone but she could no longer perform the famous forward and backward somersaults on bareback for which she was renowned. Certainly by the age forty, May was ready to retire from the life of an active circus performer.

Her active circus career was now behind her and with her husband she settled into quiet domesticity in their home at 63 Fife Street, Forest Hills, New York. Many a worn out horse found sanctuary on the Wirth estate. May was never known to sell a horse unless she was certain that its purchaser would treat it kindly.

Following her retirement she travelled frequently with her husband organizing

shows throughout the United States. Frank had some of the biggest attractions on his books throughout the 1950s including the Cisco Kid and Gene Autrey.

In 1956 they moved from their Long Island home to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where they lived at 1113 Avocado Isle.

May received the supreme honor of the American circus world when on February 23, 1964 she was admitted to the Circus Hall of Fame in Sarasota in an afternoon ceremony. The National Awards Committee sifted through nominations only once each year and she was only the second living person to be honored. May Wirth was one of three famous Australian circus artists to be admitted into the Circus Hall of Fame. The others were the incomparable tight wire artist Con Colleano, and Con's famous sister Winnie Colleano, an extraordinary trapeze artist.

Visitors found May, at eighty, gracious and still sprightly, even if she retained something of the highly temperamental disposition characteristic of many performing artists. She still possessed a sharp memory for details of the many tricks she did on horseback during her circus career. Her memories were modestly related in a gentle voice with a faint trace of an Australian accent, her merry brown eyes twinkling all the time.

Death 1978

May's companion, Mrs. Mary Black, telegraphed May's nephew in Sydney with the sad news of her death in 1978: "May Wirth died 2:20 p.m. October 18. Letter follows."

The *New York Times*, which had published obituaries of Rill Wirth and Philip St. Leon when they died in 1948 and 1958 respectively, said nothing to record the passing from life of the woman who was once "the greatest lady bareback rider that ever lived." At least the *Sarasota Herald Tribune* recorded the death of May in a local nursing home. The *White Tops* published the longest and most detailed eulogy, quoting at its end May's statement in 1912 that her "idea of heaven would be to ride on a bareback all the time, to have her meals brought to her that way when she was hungry and to sleep while jogging along when she got tired."

Mark St. Leon is the author of Spangles & Sawdust, the Circus in Australia, published in 1983 by Greenhouse Publications Pty Ltd, Richmond, Victoria, Australia.

In 1941, at age 16, I joined out with Barr Bros. a small circus traveling around Ohio. The show was owned by Bernard W. "Buck" Lucas and William M. Meyers.

Lucas, also known as Buck Bernard, had been in the circus business since just after the turn of the century. His father, Col. James P. Lucas had operated Lucas Bros. Circus, a wagon show. In the early 1920s Lucas and his father operated the Lucas Shows Circus and Wild West and Frontier Days. The letterhead of this show stated "not the largest but one of the best."

In 1938 Lucas wrote Bill Kaskiska that he had his first circus out in 1910. He said he had operated circuses off and on since that time.

Although basically a performer, Lucas successfully operated small shows around the fringe of the circus business for many years.

The Lucas operation was on and off the road during the 1920s. In 1925 he was a cowboy on the Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West, appearing in the performance as bulldogger and bucking bronco rider. In the late 1920s he was with some of the corporation shows out of Peru, Indiana.

Using a Lucas Animal Circus letterhead Lucas wrote to the American Circus Corporation on January 15, 1928: "Just a few lines in regard to a few old animals you may have. Such as an old lion, or leopard or tiger or any animal you are discarding from show business that would do as a cage animal—to look at. I am opening a zoo near Columbus, Ohio and putting my animals on display. This is a free zoo and tourist camp. Would appreciate an early reply. [signed] B. W. Lucas, Plain City, Ohio"

THE BUCK LUCAS AND WILLIAM MEYERS SHOWS

Banard Bros. and Barr Bros. Circuses

By Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

A letterhead used by Lucas in the late 1920s carried the title Madam Bonnie Lucas. It listed dogs, ponies, monkeys and miniature pony chariot racing. The title Lucas Animal Circus was used on another letterhead.

A small flyer used the Bonni Lucas Wild West Circus title. It lists trick riding on horses; roping on horses; rope spinning; bucking horses; Colonel, the horse with human brains; Guideless, wonder pony and many other acts too numerous to mention.

Lucas used the Banard Bros. title on all of his shows in the 1930s and 40s. In the early 1930s he established a winter quar-

Lucas, at left with rope, and a group of cowboys on the 101 Ranch show in 1925. Betty King collection.



ters on U. S. Route 40 near Etna, Ohio, about twenty miles east of Columbus. His shows usually toured Ohio and bordering states. The show traveled on three to ten trucks, the number of motorized units varying from year to year. It is thought that he built shows, toured for a year or so and then sold the equipment.

Over the years Lucas retained a number of horses, ponies and dogs which were used on his circuses and as animal acts on other shows and at fairs and parks. The trucks used to transport his animals were lettered Rodeo and Hippodrome Circus.

Little is known of Banard Bros. in the early 1930s. The only reference in the *Billboard* to the 1933 show appeared in the April 21 issue. It stated that Banard Bros. Circus had been booked to appear in West Liberty, West Mans-

field and Degraff, Ohio, but had failed to show up in those towns.

In 1934 he joined with J. Lyman Keyes who had operated the United Indoor Circus out of Peru, Indiana. A small ad appeared in the April 21 *Billboard* for Banard Bros. Circus wanting a complete side show, with own transportation and light plant, a Ten-In-One, two clowns, a small elephant, young ladies for iron jaw, muscle grind, web, cloud swing and ladders, frozen custard concession. The show was to open May 12 in Union City, Indiana. J. L. Keyes was listed as lessee.

The first information on the Banard show appeared in the June 2, 1934 *Billboard*. It reported that the show had played to two large audiences in Decatur, Indiana. The staff of the newly organized circus included: J. L. Keyes, manager and lessee; B. W. Banard [Lucas], supervisor; Wayne Ray, secretary-treasurer; Floyd Reeder, general agent; Charles Wallick, bandmaster; W. R. Grant, lithographer; Carl Romig, equestrian director; William Arnold, concessions; Perry Plank, front door man; Buck Maughingam, banners and side show; George Simpson, boss canvasman; James Smith, chief electrician; Clifford Darnell, head mechanic; William Durand, steward; A. Wachter, side show; Charles Land, reserve seat tickets and wrestling; Bob Printy, wrestler and John Cramer, manager of stock.

A street parade was given. The performance included: opening spec, football ponies, swinging ladders, dog acts, clowns, cloud swings, goat acts, double



Buck Lucas in front of the marquee of the 1934 Banard show. Betty King collection.

trap acts, January mule, riding dogs, juggling acts, contortions, trick horses, military pony drill, high diving monkey and bareback riding. Performers included screen cowboy, Kit Noble, Dot Noble, Peggy Davis, Carl Romig and Miss Romig, Buddy Romig, the Whipping Smiths, Rittenhouse Sisters, LaMonte troupe of clowns, J. P. McLinn, the riding Rooneys, B. W. Banard's military ponies, Mrs. B. L. Banard dog and monkey acts and Miss Sykes.

A letter written by Lucas on July 17 from Lebanon, Ohio, provides some details on the size of the show. It read: "In regard to elephant. Can use elephant if salary is right, or will work you on percentage of show. Give me particulars. Do you have transport bull and what does she do. If you care to sell her what price have you on her. I have a nice show. No grift, 26 trucks and trailers, two rings, band and calliope. Top is 60 by 120."

The Banard route was seldom published in the *Billboard* and nothing was reported until the August 4 issue when an article appeared dated July 28, with a Blanchester, Ohio date line. It read: "Banard Bros. Circus had excellent business here, both afternoon and night. It was the first circus here in a couple of years. Business has improved since leaving Indiana and the show had a wonderful break in

the weather. Among the acts are Carl Romig, Arabian horse acts; Mrs. Romig, cloud swing and tight wire; and Grace Sykes, menage, traps and swinging ladder. W. E. Brown played the calliope. Ervin Rourick was producing clown along with Lester Lankford and Fay Rourick."

In this article B. W. Banard was listed as owner-manager; Mrs. Banard, treasurer; and Tommie Reader, general agent and advance. Walter Langford

was bandmaster; Tex Darnell, master mechanic; R. Smith, electrician; and John Cramer, boss hostler. Kit Noble had the banners and was in charge of the parade. The show moved on six trucks, five semis, eight trailers and cages. J. L. Keyes was not mentioned, apparently no longer connected with the show.

The final reference to the 1934 show was in the August 18 *Billboard* when Walter Langford sent the following report: "Banard Bros. Circus has received nice business through the coal fields of Ohio. The transportation fleet has been getting earlier starts of late and boss canvasman Blue Jay has all of the canvas going up in the cool of the morning. The parade is going out at noon daily. Mr. and Mrs. Roy Kerr, of Rarden, Ohio have taken charge of the cookhouse. Romig and Romig left the show in Nelsonville. Up to this time only one night show has been lost on account of rain since entering Ohio."

Little is known about Lucas' activities during the next four years. He probably booked his animals acts on fair dates and may have toured with some small shows.

The February 4, 1939 *Billboard* reported that Banard Bros. Circus played an indoor date in Newark, Ohio. The performance was given in two rings and a steel arena and featured Madam Ban-

Letterhead used by Banard Bros. in 1938. Pfening Archives.

ard's dogs, Learch Duo with Roman rings and comedy table act, Fonda and Gladys, double traps, Reta, loop act, the Banard pony drill, riding dogs and monkeys and Captain Sells' five lions.

The May 5 *Billboard* told of Buck Lucas and William Sells, owners of Banard Bros., buying the remaining animals of the defunct World Bros. Circus in-

..NAPPANEE..

**Thursday, May 24th
at Walter's Field**

Twice Daily 3:00 P. M. — 8 P. M.

PARADE - AT - NOON

BANARD BROS. CIRCUS and WILD WEST

From Peru the Circus City



Presenting Many Amazing
New Feature Acts
From America's Leading
Circus

FAMOUS
INTERNATIONAL
STARS
INCLUDING

**World
Renowned**



Rooney and Romney Families of Riders, Beautiful Horses.

Famous LaMont Troupe Clown—Unexcelled.

Kit Noble, Movie Cowboy in Person—Cowboys, Cowgirls.

Educated Dogs, Goats, Monkeys, Bear, Mules, Ponies
and Horses.

ADMISSION

25c and 40c

Special

School Children Matinee

Tickets must be purchased

at Johnson drug store before

performance 10c

Newspaper ad used by the 1934 Banard show. Pfening Archives.

cluding ten ponies, twelve monkeys, fourteen dogs, three bears five horses and two lions. It was also noted that the show had been playing indoor dates during the winter.

In 1939 Buck Lucas became acquainted with William M. Meyers on a revived edition of the Walter L. Main Circus.

Myers, an Akron, Ohio horse dealer, entered the circus business after investing in Newton Bros. Circus after it had been reorganized in Minerva, Ohio after a mid-season closing in 1938. Myers continued on tour with the show, retitled Camel Bros., throughout the fall and winter of 1938. In March of 1939 the *Billboard* reported that Myers owned the big top, seats and props from the Newton show.

In 1939 Frank Ruttman and Ben R. Jones organized a circus using the Walter L. Main title in Canton, Ohio to play week long stands. Meyers had the side show and Lucas presented his bears, dogs, bucking mule and pony drill in the big show. The Main show opened in Akron, Ohio on May 20 with a strong performance including the Powers elephants, the Ro-

BANARD BROS. SHOWS



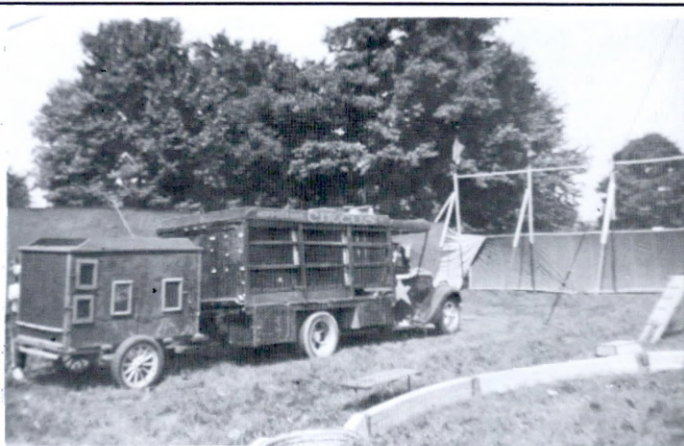
mig-Rooney troupe of riders, Ernie Wiswell and the Lucas stock. The Ruttman edition of Walter L. Main folded in Canton on June 3.

The June 17 *Billboard* reported on the closing stating that William Meyers, who owned much of the equipment, had taken charge of the situation and supervised the disposition of the equipment. A representative of the U. S. Tent & Awning Company arrived promptly and arranged for return of big top that had been recently purchased by Ruttman. He sold the smaller new side show top to Meyers. Another article in the same issue said that Lucas had taken his animals to Springfield, Ohio to join the Great Lakes Exposition carnival as a free attraction.

The June 24 *Billboard* provided news about Meyers opening a one ring circus in Brewster, Ohio on June 8. Meyers used a big top he owned. The Main side show top was used with half of it housing stock. The show had fourteen sections of blues seating around 1,000 people. Two hundred chairs were used the first two days and then discarded. Some of the acts which remained after the Main show closed were taken on by Meyers. Jack Moore was equestrian director with his wife doing double trap and wire acts. The Romig-Rooney troupe was featured. Red Lunsford presented a wild west concert. Johnny Wall was in charge of the canvas and transportation. The show had one truck and one car on the advance. The Walter L. Main title was used pending arrangements with Walter L. Main.

On June 24 Main told the *Billboard* that a show then playing in Ohio had no authority to use his name. He said he had warned the owner of the circus to discontinue using it but later learned that the show was still using the Main title. Main

The Lucas pony drill on Barr Bros. Circus in 1941. Pfening photo.



Barr Bros. bear cage and dog trailer inside the side walled arena in Mt. Vernon, Ohio July 21, 1941. Pfening photo.

intimated his title had been much abused in prior weeks due to the folding of the newly formed Walter L. Main Circus in Canton. He stated he had received no compensation for use of the title from Frank Ruttman, and that with the closing of that show the agreement between him and Ruttman was automatically terminated. William Meyers, who reorganized the show, had been piloting a one ring circus bearing Main's name the prior two weeks, indicated he would change the title as soon as a supply of paper was exhausted.

After a month Meyers closed the show in Johnstown, Ohio due to poor business. U. S. Tent retrieved the side show tent that Meyers had agreed to purchase.

Nothing was heard about Meyers activities in 1940. Lucas played fair dates for Klein Attractions that year, presenting four high school horses, a six pony drill, dogs, goats, a mule and monkeys.

In 1941 Meyers and Lucas formed a partnership to operate a new show, using a new title, Barr Bros. Circus. The first news of the show was in the July 12 *Billboard*. The article read: "A new motorized show, under the title Barr Bros Circus has been launched by William Meyers, who

at one time had out his own circus and for a time was associated with William Newton's, and Buck Banard. The show has been playing one day stands through central Ohio, adding several thrill acts when a Sunday stand is played.

"Meyers said here that the show, made up mostly of Banard's stock and personnel, was sold outright for four days July 2-5 for the Fairport Harbor July 4 celebration. After the stand the show will resume its one day bookings.

"Meyers said the show was moving slow due to the shortage of labor and that a new top would be used within the next few days. Some Eastern Ohio territory has been contracted and the show will be close to Canton until after the middle of July."

I joined Barr Bros. in Athens, Ohio about the middle of June. Don McCullough, my high school gym teacher had signed to join the show as a clown and acrobat and I went along with him. I found the show to be not much of a circus. It was traveling on about four or five trucks and a couple of house trailers. Five horses and four ponies were carried in a straight truck. A bear cage truck pulled a two wheeled trailer full of dogs. The Barr Bros. title did not appear on any of the rolling stock, only the word circus.

In Athens the one ring performance was presented in front of a grandstand. At the next stand the show was presented in a side walled arena. It had no big top. Tickets were sold from a ticket box at an opening in the side wall. The performance was mostly animals owned by Buck Lucas.

John Cramer presented a bear act. Larry Duane and Miss Tommie McCoy presented menage horses and wild west rou-

Barr Bros. Circus horse van with four ponies and a donkey in July of 1941. Pfening photo.



tines. Buck Lucas presented a pony drill and did rope spinning. Faith King and Larry Duane did a knife throwing act. Don McCullough did clowning and a tumbling act. Another man presented a balancing act. Mrs. Lucas sold tickets and handled the office. Bill Meyers was general manager. Meyers' wife Mildred was on the advance doing booking and placing newspaper ads.

The first job I was given was hawking candy during the pitch given in the middle of the show. I was also "generally useful," moving props and helping put up the show. After forty-nine years my memory is rather dim.

After playing Athens the show moved to Northeast Ohio for the big four day stand in Fairport Harbor. During this time I sometimes drove the bear truck, an old Studebaker with bad breaks. Piloting that truck over the hills of southern Ohio was quite a thrill for a sixteen year old boy. [I had received my drivers license at age thirteen.]

Following Fairport Harbor the show resumed one day stands. It was at that time that I was "promoted" to the advance. What this really meant was that I was to drive Mrs. Meyers as she contracted the show about a week ahead. I began placing the newspaper ads and putting up window cards. The date of the show was written on the cards as there was no time to order dated cards.

Mrs. Meyers stayed in tourists homes and I slept in the car. I remember that she once told me that if I had been her nephew I too could have stayed in the tourists homes. So much for that. By the end of July the show was in Mt. Vernon about forty miles north of Columbus. After about six weeks I decided that I had enough of an introduction to the circus business and I returned home.

The next mention in the *Billboard* was in the July 19 issue where an advertisement appeared wanting--for fairs--free act, family act, girls for menage, aerial acts, cowboys, thrill drivers, truck drivers and a boss canvasman. The show wanted to buy seats and a 60 or 70 foot top, and two or three middles.

The show apparently was doing well as a note in the September 6 *Billboard* dated August 30 in Jeromesville, Ohio reported that Barr Bros. Circus with new canvas and three new trucks had had a big day in August 24 in Ottawa, Ohio. Larry Duane was still being featured in the concert and Mr. and Mrs. Don Mack [McCullough] were back on the show after playing fairs.



CIRCUS

BARR BROS. Trained Animal CIRCUS

Will Present Two Performances at the Waverly Ball Park
Auspices of the Retail Merchants' Association

Featuring CAPTAIN BANARD and His Trained Black Bears!
LARRY DUANE, famous movie cowboy! GLADYS and FONDA
—aerialists. —Trained Dogs, Monkeys, Ponies, "Kentucky Colonel",
—Wonder Horse

Admission—Adults 55c; Children 25c Shows at 2 and 8 p. m.

ONE DAY, ONLY

Saturday, MAY 9th

Barr Bros. Circus newspaper ad used in Waverly, Ohio the second stand of the 1942 season. Pfening Archives.

Apparently the show closed around the middle of September as the September 27 *Billboard* reported that Larry Duane was with Madame Banard's circus unit playing fairs.

The final 1941 Barr Bros. report in the December 6 *Billboard* told of plans for the 1942 season. It read: "Barr Bros. Circus, motorized, which made its debut last season, will go out next spring greatly enlarged, Bill Meyers and Buck Banard, co-owners, have announced. Work has been started in the Etna, Ohio winter quarters with the building of a new semi-trailer and several smaller trucks. Later it is planned to move the quarters to Indiana, where the show will open in the spring. A seventy foot round top with three thirty foot middles and a side show top have been purchased. During the few weeks of

Buck Lucas in his white Stetson hat in the middle 1940s. Betty King collection.



the '41 tour the show did not have a losing day."

During the winter of 1941-42 work continued at the Etna, Ohio winter quarters. The January 17 *Billboard* carried a report on the show which read: "Outbreak of war has not altered plans for Barr Bros. Circus to reopen in Central Ohio during April. Work in quarters is proceeding under Buck Banard. Equipment is being revamped and recently purchased stock is being broken. All canvas is now in quarters and two semi-trailers have been added. Manager Bill Meyers said the show had enough tires on hand for the first half of the season and anticipated no difficulties in moving. The show will not contract fairs and will stay on the road until late fall. Another dog act and other small animals have been purchased. Mr. and Mrs. Meyers, who are promoting indoor events in Ohio and West Virginia, will return in March to finish readying for the 1942 tour."

In February Buck Lucas advised the *Billboard* that he would not take out his show due to illness of his wife. Bill Meyers would pilot the outfit. Lucas stated he planned to operate a riding academy and dude ranch on his farm at Etna.

The Barr show ran an ad in the April 11 *Billboard* listing its needs. The show wanted "a general agent and lithographer with car. Acts doing two or more, clowns, animal acts and family to feature. Boss canvasman, ticket sellers, candy butchers, electrician, cook, mechanic and working men in all departments." A manager and all other people were needed for the side show. The show wanted to buy a twenty by thirty marquee. It was to open April 23.

Madam Carrie Banard's health must have improved as Lucas and his contingent were with the show when it opened.

The opening was delayed until May 7. The May 23 *Billboard* covered it with this report: "Barr Bros. Circus, greatly enlarged over that of last year, opened in Chillicothe, Ohio May 7 for a two day stand to good business.

"Waverly on the 9th was fair, with Washington C. H. on the 10th and 11th giving the show good night houses. Much new equipment, including a big top, was in evidence. Buck Banard's circus unit, back again, features Larry Duane, Hollywood cowboy. Side show, not complete for the opening, was not set up. A concert will be added.

"Show moves on eight company owned

trucks and five trailers. Advance was under the direction of Mrs. Mildred Meyers in Chillicothe, where she prepared a large program. Show was sponsored by the American Legion.

"Staff includes Bill Meyers, owner-manager; Mildred Meyers, secretary-treasurer; and Buck Banard, announcer. Fred D. Pfening, press agent last season, was on hand for the opening."

The show played a number of dates in Ohio and then moved into Indiana. It advertised in the June 27 *Billboard* for family and animal acts as well as wild west performers for concert using a general delivery address in Peru, Indiana.

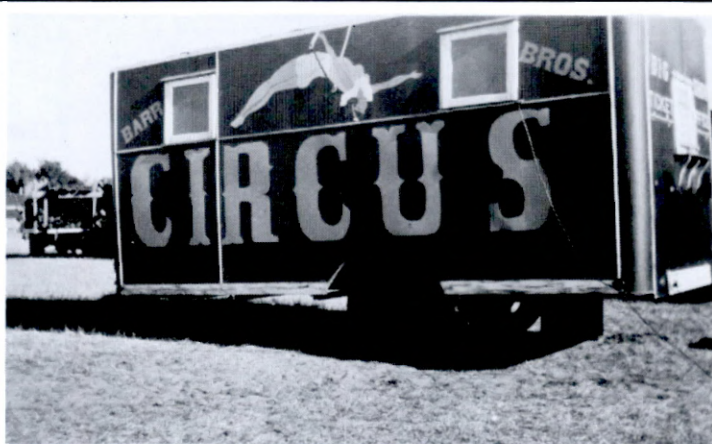
By the middle of July Lucas and Meyers had parted company. Lucas and his personnel and animals appeared in South Bend, Indiana at a Rodeo and Hippodrome show promoted by the Gus Sun Agency. Larry Duane offered a whip act and Capt. Banard presented his military ponies.

Doc Ford and his wife joined the show and Meyers continued completing a rather long season. The October 24 *Billboard* reported on Barr Bros. in an article dated October 17: "Barr Bros. Circus closed a twenty week season at Vanceburg, Kentucky on October 10 and moved to Cincinnati, Ohio for winter quarters. Despite many handicaps, including the loss of its big top in a cyclone at Red Key, Indiana early in the season, and a fire at Aborton, Michigan, which consumed much of the equipment, the show continued by working in a side wall corral and had a good season."

"William Meyers, owner-manager, purchased additional equipment and animals en route. Show traveled 4,800 miles and played through Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and Kentucky. Calls for military service kept the show short handed most of the season, but it moved daily and lost only two performances."

"Lewis Ford, producing clown, went to Florida for the winter. Mystaria, mentalist, started her night club booking. Borghall [Ford] Albertine, aerialist is visiting friends and relatives in Minnesota before starting indoor dates. Winister Townsend, juggler and wire performer has been retained by management for winter dates. L. B. 'Doc' Ford and family, announcer and aerialists, left for an extended trip and will later work indoor dates in the Northwest. Francis Stillman, female impersonator went to work in the High Hat Club in Detroit."

"Mildred L. Meyers,



A two wheeled trailer was used as the Barr Bros. 1946 ticket wagon. Pfening Archives.

show's general agent, has contracted fifteen indoor dates for a revised musical edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which will use local talent and be under personal direction of Mrs. Harry Shannon, formerly of Shannon Players.

"Work of repainting and building started immediately to prepare props for the winter show. Trucks and other equipment are also being overhauled before being put into storage."

By early November Meyers had moved the show to Nelsonville, Ohio for the winter. Nelsonville was to become Meyers home and he remained there the rest of his life. He purchased a small coal mine in the area and concentrated his business activities there for the next few years.

The circus activities of Buck Lucas in 1943 are unknown, although he probably booked his animal acts on fair dates. William Meyers circus activities that season are also unknown. In 1944 Lucas and his stock were with the Bud Anderson Circus.

During the winter of 1944-45 a number of showmen came to the conclusion that the coming season would be a strong

Barr Bros. Circus 1946 big top canvas and pole wagon. Pfening Archives.



one for circuses. That year Martin Arthur moved his truck circus to rails. Ben Davenport and Harry Hammel framed Austin Bros., also on rails. Art Concello put the Russell show on rails.

New truck shows in 1945 were E. E. Coleman's M. L. Clark, C. C. Day's Cooper Bros., Joe Conway's Dix Bros.; Forrest Freeland's Dean Bros., Ray Marsh Brydon's Dan Rice, C. R.

Montgomery, Bob Dickman and Esclante.

Buck Lucas also got the circus bug and he made plans to tour Banard Bros. again in 1945. The Etna, Ohio winter quarters were again buzzing in preparation of taking the show on the road.

The April 14 *Billboard* reported on the show: "Buck Lucas, owner-manager of Banard Bros. Circus, announced that the staff and most of the acts are set for an opening on April 26."

"William Nesbitt is to have charge of the contracting and will have two billers. Other staff members are to be: Les Garner, boss canvasman and reserves; Roy Gibson, side show boss; Larry Duane, boss hossler; John Kramer, lights; Hank Williams, props; Mr. and Mrs. William Garrison, cookhouse; Mrs. Banard, office; Jim McNew, front door; Benny Tell, sound; Jack McFarland, banners; Captain Furguson, purchasing and J. C. Drake, publicity."

"Show is to carry fifty-four head of stock and move on nine trucks, nine trailers and four cars. Big top is to be a sixty with three thirty foot middles."

"Acts contracted include Neta Garner, ladder and loop; Beverly Harnett and mule; Faith King and her Hollywood horse, Pancho; Captain Furguson, dogs and ponies; Loretta Kern, liberty horses; Bernice Duane, Spanish web; Shirley Jewett's Alaskan dogs and Larry Duane's riding school and jumping horses."

The show opened with a two day stand in Etna on May 3 and moved to Ashville, Ohio to start one day stands on May 5. I visited the show in Ashville. It was like old home week seeing many of the people I had been with on Barr Bros. two years earlier. Buck always called me Freddy and I was treated royally

The May 12 *Billboard* reported that Tom Gorman, who had left the Cronin show after the Los Angeles engagement, had joined Banard Bros. His official status

was not announced. It is doubtful that Gorman actually joined Banard as no further reference was made to him.

In Jamestown, Ohio, the third stand of the season, the big top was blown down before the matinee and both performances were given under the sky inside a side wall.

The show played two additional stands in Ohio and moved into Indiana at Russville on May 10.

The Dressing Room Gossip column in the June 16 *Billboard* carried a short report on the Banard show. It stated that two new sixty foot round ends had been delivered, making the third set for the season. Loretta Kerns' riding dogs had joined, Elaine and Frances were doing swinging ladders; Roy Vincent was doing a rope spinning act, Harry Johnson was

six weeks had proved redder than red, and had given the show a neat profit. All acts had remained to the closing."

The 1946 circus season was to see both Banard Bros. and Barr Bros. circuses on tour.

William Meyers joined with Doc Ford to tour Barr Bros. The February 9 *Billboard* carried an ad for Barr Bros. The show had a long list of needs including a calliope, blue seats, complete grandstand with chairs seven or eight rows high, and a fifty foot round top with thirty foot middle for the side show. The

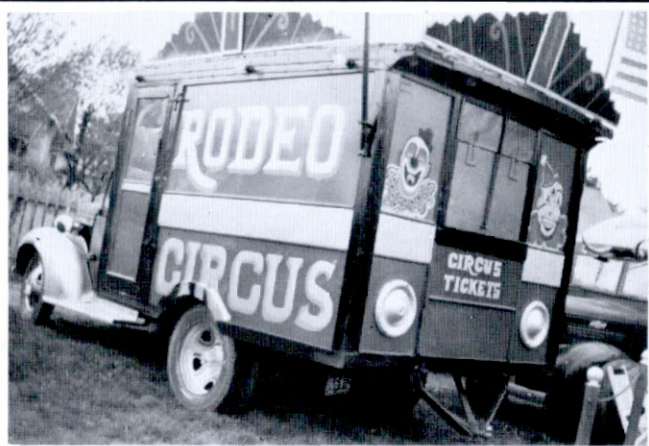
show wanted to buy or lease a performing female elephant, liberty horse act, pony drill and a dog act. An agent was needed as were clowns and acts of all kinds. The show was to open in Nelsonville, Ohio on April 27. All were asked to contact Doc Ford at Nelsonville.

The same issue reported some notes

from the Banard winter quarters. Ray Lippincott was breaking menage horses and a mule act. John Kramer and his crew were building and repairing equipment. Buck Lucas had just purchased two semis for horses and canvas.

A *Billboard* article dated Nelsonville, Ohio, February 23 told of Barr Bros. winter work. Doc Ford and William Meyers, had purchased the F. C. Fisher and Son Circus in Jackson, Michigan giving

Light plant truck on Banard Bros. in 1946. Pfening Archives.



Banard Bros. Circus ticket wagon West Jefferson, Ohio May 8, 1946. Pfening Archives.

Barr an additional seven head of ponies and horses, a lion, llama, two performing goats, a six dog act and a monkey. Four trucks were included in the deal giving the Barr show total of twelve trucks and eight trailers.

A new office wagon had been completed and a new cookhouse was to soon be built. Cal Townsend was in charge of the building crew and Frank Williams was handling the motor and lighting equipment.

Barney and Jimmy Arenson, clowns, had been signed for the coming season. The show had purchased an air calliope and a set of side show banners. William M. Meyers did not plan to travel with the show due to his coal mining interests in Nelsonville.

Barr Bros. Circus opened in Nelsonville, Ohio on April 27. The night show was lost due to a light plant breakdown. The company moved on a Sunday run to Gallipolis and then played nine more dates in Ohio before moving into Indiana at Union City. The May 2 stand in Waverly, Ohio was blown. Barr contracted ten stands in Indiana and blew two of them in Winchester and Logansport. On May 24 the show was in Lexington, Illinois, where the seats fell, causing a law suit. This was the start of serious problems for the show.

Barr entered Iowa on May 28 at Wilton Junction. It blew the following day at Anamosa. Business had been very spotty and Meyers joined the show to get it reorganized. He and his



F. C. Fisher, Jr., side show canvas boss Harley Ross, and F. C. Fisher, Sr. in front of the Barr Bros. light plant in 1946. Pfening Archives.

clowning and the Troy family was presenting aerial acts. The program was running an hour and forty minutes.

Lucas ran a want ad in the June 23 *Billboard*. Due to enlarging the show, he needed an assistant boss canvasman, truck drivers, clowns, cowboys and cowgirls for menage and muscians. Melvin Stears wanted side show acts. Those interested were to write to Chester, Illinois for a date on June 23.

The show came back through Indiana, played Ohio dates and went into Pennsylvania. The *Billboard* carried an article dated September 8, Connellsville, Pennsylvania reading: "Banard Bros. Circus closed a successful eighteen week season Labor Day.

"The show had a lot of tough going early in the season due to rainy weather and manpower shortage. The last





partner Doc Ford came to a parting of the ways on May 31 in Venton, Iowa where Meyers purchased Ford's interest.

Meyers leased the outfit to Francis Stillman and F. C. Fisher, Jr. Business was slow for the show and the concession department left on June 7 in Decorah, Iowa. The following day the show was contracted for Preston, Minnesota, but it was blown.

The July 30, 1946 *Billboard* stated the show had been playing through Iowa and Minnesota to very spotty business. Ill health was given as Meyers' reason for leasing the show. Since business had been poor it is possible that Fisher came on to take back the equipment he had sold Meyers in the spring. Meyers returned to Nelsonville to mind his other businesses.

The new owners continued on the contracted route until June 12 at Kasson, Minnesota. Waseca had been booked for the next day but the show played Dodge Center instead. The show played Mayfield on June 15 and then Barr went to Madelia, but no performances were given.

The trucks were in bad condition and the show laid off in Madelia for nine days while the rolling stock was rebuilt and repainted.

The show reopened in Armstrong, Iowa on June 24. Fisher was handling the advance. Stillman had the office and was in charge of the day to day operations.

The lessees brought on some new people including R. C. Roberts, side show manager; Chuck Willis and Harley Price, concessions; Johnny Heaton, front door; Harley Price, boss canvasman and George Hazelton, pit show. The big show was running an hour and a half and had a variety show for the concert.

Banard Bros. Circus on a lot during the 1946 season. This show, his last, probably was the largest ever toured by Buck Lucas. Pfening Archives.

Fisher and Stillman soon had problems. The night show was lost in Belmont, Iowa on June 27, because of no lights. Ackley was blown the next day as was Parkersburg on the 29th. The show remained in Parkersburg for four days for additional truck repairs.

Fisher and Stillman desolved their partnership and divided the equipment. Fisher quickly headed the show to territory well known to him in Michigan. June 3 to 7 were needed to get the circus to Tekonsha, Michigan. However when the

Faith King, Buck Lucas' adopted daughter, on the Banard show in 1946. Pfening Archives.



show arrived Fisher found that it had not been contracted and the date was lost. The show actually reopened again for the second time in Springport, Michigan on July 9. Barr Bros. remained in Michigan until September 10. Newberry on July 29 brought the show two packed houses. The show blew two other dates on August 17 and 28. Barr Bros. Circus closed the 1946 season in Ney, Ohio on September 11.

It would appear that

Fisher had taken possession of the equipment, either by purchase or reclaiming it from the spring sale to Meyers. In 1947 the F. C. Fisher & Son Circus was back on the road.

In January of 1946 Lucas made plans to again tour Banard Bros. Circus. He placed an ad in the January 26 *Billboard* wanting a family act, clowns, a mechanic, billers and a boss canvasman. The winter quarters were in Enta, Ohio.

In January of 1946 Lucas was looking to buy some additional animals. He wrote to Ted LaVelda, owner of Monroe Bros. Circus, regarding the purchase of a llama.

LaVelda answered him on January 18, 1946 advising that he had a llama but it was not for sale. He further stated that he had spent the whole winter hunting a camel, a llama and ponies. Hay eating animals apparently were hard to find during the war years.

Buck Lucas had some stock for sale in January of 1946 which he offered to Paul Lewis. On January 19, 1946 Lewis wrote, "Now regarding the stock you have for sale, Mae and I will try to come down and see you shortly and look the stock over."

"Why don't you combine with with us on a deal to play fraternal spots this season, your stuff and what we have could just about make up the show."

Lucas had been in touch with Harry Haag about joining him in 1946. Haag wrote to Lucas on January 10 saying, "Could you give me some kind of idea as to what you would be able to pay. My wife [Helen] may be working by that time, other wise we have two acts. Now there is my wife's sister and husband who live here, you may know them, they are going out this year and they do Roman

rings, whips and ropes and they both ride and he does rope horse catching. He can do general clowning."

Lucas wrote him back asking, "What do you want to come over here with your elephant. I furnish gas, oil, eats and feed. Will make it pleasant over here and want you to stay all season. Will have a long season, jumps not too long and payday every Sunday."

In spite of the idyllic words Haag did not join the Banard show that year.

An extensive article on the Banard show appeared in the March 23 *Billboard*. There had been much activity in the Etna winter quarters. New trappings for ponies and horses and been completed. New props had been built and repairs had been made to the light plants. The show had added three semis making a total of twelve pieces of rolling equipment and five house cars. The color scheme was red, cream and blue. There were twenty head of stock and eighteen dogs in quarters.

It was announced that Ted Milligan, on Dailey Bros. the prior season, was to have charge of the side show. Other acts signed were the Silverlake and Harvey families. Larry "Smokey" Duane, the concert feature, was coming back making his ninth year with Lucas. Faith King was to present horses, dogs and ponies in the big show.

Banard ran an ad in the April 13 *Billboard* asking Ted Milligan, Ben Holmes, Les Garner and W. C. Vandergrift to report on April 20. Performers were to report on April 30. The show was to open on May 3.

Ted Milligan must not have shown up as Lucas advertised in the May 3 *Billboard* for a man to take charge of the side show. He also wanted to buy a calliope.

Banard Bros. Circus and Rodeo opened in Pataskala, Ohio on May 3. Pataskala is located about four miles from the Lucas property in Etna. A number of visiting showmen were on hand for the opening including Walter L. Main.

The show had a poor showing in Medina, Ohio on May 20 when advertising material failed to arrive. The matinee was cancelled because of heavy rain and only 125 attended the night show. The show was held over until the next day, but cold weather cancelled the matinee and only 100 showed up at night.

The May 25 *Billboard* carried an extensive report on the Banard show. Dated Norwalk, Ohio, May 18 it read: "Banard Bros. Circus and Rodeo was here today.

Show makes a good flash, all equipment being painted in bright colors. Particularly outstanding are three horse semis. Wardrobe was ample and neat.

"Midway has Buck Maughiman's popcorn; Bower's grab stand; George's novelties and pony track; and Slim White's side show, which has new banners and a forty by sixty foot top. The organization moves on five big semis and nine straight trucks and has seven privately owned house cars and six shown owned trailers.

"Carl Woolrich heads the band. Other staff members are Buck Lucas and Walter Holtsberry owners; Mrs. B. W. Lucas, sec-



This Banard horse truck, sold to Meyers in 1946, remained unused in Nelsonville, Ohio until at least 1950 when this photo was taken. Pfening Archives.

retary; George Kenneth, boss canvasman; Hank Williams, mechanic; John Kramer, electrician and Larry Duane fleet manager.

"Program: 1, grand entry with eighteen people on horseback; 2, Faith King, riding; 3, riding dogs, worked by Loretta Kern, Della King and Georgia Geigers; 4, clowns; 5, Myrna Silverlake and Bobby Troy, single traps; 6, liberty horses, worked by Faith King; 7, swinging ladders, Elaine Addison, Mrs. Silverlake and Myrna Silverlake; 8, clowns; 9, performing mules, presented by Miss Kern, Miss Adela and Myrna Silverlake; 10, Alaskan dogs, presented by Faith King; 11, concert announcement with Larry Duane, Bonnie Duane, Loretta Kern, Don Archer, Joe Allison and Miss Tex Rhodes; 12, Silverlakes, comedy acrobatics; 13, menage, ridden by Miss King, Larry Miller, Bonnie Duane, Joe Allison and Don Archer; 14, clown baseball game; 16, Silverlakes, comedy; 17, Jargo, clown; 18, bareback and mechanical riding."

Banard ran into problems the last week of May. Barberton, contracted for May 22-23, was lost because the paper to bill the

stand did not arrive. Shelby on May 24 gave good weather but the town brought only a half matinee and a three quarter at night.

On May 28 the show was in Wellington, Ohio. The lot was so muddy when the organization arrived it couldn't set up in time for a matinee. The night show was delayed a half hour, and a half house shivered in the cold while waiting for the start of the show. Lucas never had a strong advance and billing crew. Mostly window cards and newspaper ads were used which seldom appeared more than a week in advance of the show.

By early July the show was in Michigan where Bob Couls of Webster Bros. Circus visited. The July 6 *Billboard* carried a blind advertisement offering a complete motorized circus for sale. A box number care of the *Billboard* was listed. This was the Banard show.

The August 3 *Billboard* reported that Lucas and his partner Holtsberry had been dickering with several prospective buyers since the show had been offered for sale. It was still under their ownership when a *Billboard* representative visited it in Abingdon, Illinois on July 20. Lucas stated that he had been wanting to sell because of his health but Holtsberry, who had joined him as a partner in the spring, stated he had no desire to sell. The show had been sticking to towns of less than 5,000. Lucas said it "was a good crossroads show. The show's own stock is the backbone of the performance and holds down the nut, so that no terrific business is needed to win a little money."

The show had eleven trucks and was feeding forty-four people. A push pole big top was used, a seventy with three thirties. The seats were six high all around with no reserved chairs. Prices were seventy-five cents for adults, twenty-five cents for children and twenty-five cents for the concert. No concert was given in the afternoons. In fact no matinees were given if the farmers were busy, which was frequently the case. Lucas reported that the show had been able to get by if any kind of a crowd at all showed up. The show's heavy emphasis was on the rodeo acts, such as rope spinning, whip cracking, trick riding and other forms of horsemanship, including a menage number with six riders. The show carried thirty-four head of stock.

Lucas' adopted daughter Faith King on her horse Pancho presented a troupe of sixteen dogs. Smokey Duane was the top

cowboy and was aided in the concert by his wife Bonnie, Doug Gordon, Roy Moore, Loretta Kern, Eloise Rhodes, Jack Gunn and Miss King. Maxine and Archie Silverlake did Roman rings, web and single traps. Bill Dimsdale had the side show in a forty by sixty push pole top.

The show was cut down a bit after the opening. There had been five semis and nine straight trucks on the show when it opened in May.

On August 7 Banard was in Pittsfield, Illinois and played to a half house in the afternoon and a packed house at night. The C. R. Montgomery Circus was billed there for August 20.

The September 14 *Billboard* told of the show closing. It reported that Banard Bros. Circus had closed on Labor Day at North Vernon, Indiana, with poor advance billing and a general shortage of help given as the reason for the early shuttering.

The show made the move to winter quarters in one day and John Kramer had everything ready for the move in. The show played five states and the staff personnel remained intact through the tour. Lucas

quickly booked his horses, ponies, mules and dogs at a fair in Eaton, Ohio opening September 10.

At age fifty-five Buck Lucas decided that he no longer wanted to be a circus owner. On January 3, 1947 Lucas wrote to the *Billboard* and told of the sale of his show: "William Meyers of Barr Bros. Circus of Nelsonville, Ohio bought my complete show, everything but the stock.

"Mr. Meyers is the operator of coal mines and is owner of the Treading Garage of Nelsonville. Meyers is enlarging his show for the coming season.

"Deal includes eleven trucks, four semi jobs and five house cars, two sleepers, tents, light plants and cookhouse. My reason for selling is bad health. Miss Faith King will keep the dogs, ponies and menage horses and I will place them on some circus or play dates and fairs. At present I have not decided what I will do, except to go to Cleveland [Clinic] Hospital for a check up."

Lucas continued to play fairs and spot dates with his stock for the next few years. In 1952 he returned to the circus and booked his stock on Arthur Sturmak's Howes Famous Hippodrome Circus. Faith King remained with him on the Howes show.

After his his wife Carrie died and he and Faith King retired to the property in Etna, Ohio. But Lucas could not remain inactive. He and Faith cleared off the back part of his property at the corner of Route 40 and Smoke Road and created the Rodeo Jamboree Park and Petting Zoo. He had a flyer printed inviting groups to hold picnics at the park where they could see rodeo and circus acts. He offered a free picnic grove with plenty of shade, ta-



Buck Lucas in front of a wild west show he had on the midway of the Wallace Bros. carnival in the 1930s. Betty King collection.

bles, swings, fireplaces, a free zoo, a thirty by thirty foot platform and free use of a public address system. He also offered concessions such as a pony track, novelties, popcorn, eating stands and kiddie rides. There was dancing each evening to a hillbilly band.

Lucas went on the road with his horses, dogs and ponies and left the park in the hands of a man he had known for a number of years. When Lucas returned he found the man had allowed to park to go to pot. Lucas got mad and physically destroyed it.

Faith King died of cancer at age forty-eight in 1972. Shortly thereafter Lucas lost his eyesight, but rather than give up he and another man ordered a large number of snakes and put together a snake pit show. With a small truck and a camper they hit the road again and were gone for the summer. After this last sojourn in show business, he retired for good.

Bernard Wheeler Lucas died on June 8, 1986 at age ninety-five, and is buried next to his wife in the Kirkersville, Ohio Ce-

metery. He was buried in a grand western outfit with his white Stetson.

It is not known why Meyers purchased the Banard Bros. property. He must have still had the itch to operate a circus. After being off the road for a few years Barr Bros. Circus toured again in 1950 and 1951. Little is known about these later editions. The only *Billboard* reference during either season was a small 1951 Barr ad wanting men for big top, agent, family acts and a complete side show. Those interested were to contact the show in Wells-ville, Ohio May 31 to June 2.

Meyers bought the Saratoga Bar in Nelsonville and operated it for a number of years. I visited him there in the middle 1950s.

The author thanks Mrs. Betty King, neice of Buck Lucas, for her help with information and photographs in the preparation of this article.

EPILOG

On February 14, 1990, a cold rainy day, I dove out to Etna,

Ohio, twenty-five miles east of Columbus on old Route 40. I was hoping to find someone still living on the old Buck Lucas property. It had been at least fifteen years since I had visited Lucas. The old barn was still there, with holes in the roof. The small living cabins were still there. I knocked on the door of the larger living building but there was no answer. A no trespassing sign was in a window. I saw a pickup truck and a recent model sports car parked on the property. I walked over and looked in the barn which showed no sign of any circus property. The former winter quarters of the Lucas shows looked rather run down.

I returned to my car, and sat there a moment. I closed my eyes to imagine the activity that took place there fifty years ago when horses and ponies were trained, circus trucks were built and lettered, and more than one circus was framed to take to the road. I thought about Buck Lucas' hillbilly jamboree park and his final days.

It was a bit like looking at where the the former quarters of the American Circus Corporation in Peru, Indiana used to be.

I will never be sixteen again and joining my first circus, Buck Lucas and Bill Meyers' Barr Bros.

MIKE MARTIN'S



CIRCUS HOBBY HALL

**SUMMER
VIDEO
BLOWOUT!**

BACK BY POPULAR DEMAND

**YOU'VE LIKED THE FIRST TWO TAPES IN OUR NOSTALGIA SERIES
SO WELL, WE'RE MAKING THEM AVAILABLE ONCE AGAIN.**

NOSTALGIA #1:

- 1) COLE BROS. 30's
- 2) HAGENBECK-WALLACE 30's
- 3) CLYDE BEATTY'S JUNGLELAND
- 4) P.T. BARNUM PRESENTS J. LIND

NOSTALGIA #2:

- 1) ROBBINS BROS. 30's
- 2) WALTER L. MAIN 30's
- 3) BARNES/SELLS-FLOTO 30's
- 4) BUFFALO & PAWNEE BILL

NOSTALGIA #3:

- 1) HAGEN BROS. 1950
- 2) TOM MIX CIRCUS 1935
- 3) CRISTIANI BROS. 1959
- 4) TERRELL JACOBS 1951/52

RINGLING/BARNUM VOL #1

- 1) WINTER QUARTERS 1951
- 2) MADISON SQUARE GARDEN 1950
- 3) BACKYARD, MENAGERIE 30's - 50's
- 4) "MAKING THE DEMILLE MOVIE" 1951

EACH TAPE 2 FULL HOURS - \$25.00 P.P.

COMING MID-JULY: OUR NEXT RELEASE!

"A VISIT TO CLOWN ALLEY"

CIRCUS HOBBY HALL 11950 107th AVE. N., LARGO, FL 34648

RINGLING BROS. AND BARNUM & BAILEY COMBINED SHOWS

Season of 1924

A SELECTION OF
PETE MARDO PHOTOS



Mable Stark and friend.



Welcome to the big one.

Inside the world's largest big top.



The Dragon spec float with midgets.

Ella Bradna's "Act Beautiful."





Interior of the side show.



The Sarattos balancing act.



Albert Powell in the back yard.



The big show band leading the spec.

Dutch Ricardo's lion act.



Loading the side show canvas.



Father Ed Sullivan has been on the big lot for two decades, but he deserves to be remembered by those that knew him and to be introduced to those who are not aware of his place in circus history.

Recently Father Jack Toner, Circus Chaplain for the Bishops' Committee on Migration and Tourism, said: "To this day veteran circus people speak of him with an esteem, admiration and affection that is just overwhelming and amazing. For well over a generation he had a tremendous impact on the lives of circus people meeting not only their spiritual needs, but providing them with physical and emotional support as well."

"In the aforementioned areas of activities and responsibilities he was unique in the industry and given his years of service, I doubt anyone will ever match or even approach his record of service to circus people."

By May 3, 1898, when Edward S. Sullivan was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, there were many Sullivans in the Boston area. The root of Father Ed's immediate branch was his grandfather, Dennis O'Sullivan, who had come from County Cork in 1851 at the age of twenty. Father Ed was the oldest of five children. His father was a postal worker in Cambridge.

As a boy Edward would watch for the posters that foretold the coming of a circus. He was at the lot early to apply for work. So enthusiastically did he work that he could barely keep awake later to enjoy his free pass.

FATHER ED

The Circus Priest

By Eva V. Amidon

His first teen-age job was in a theater. But he was advised that he should be outdoors more. In his own words, "I was a skinny kid with a tendency toward lung diseases." Fortunately a job in line with his needs and interests presented itself. Nearby Lexington Park advertised for someone to serve as a helper with the zoo's animals. Edward applied and got the job. He told his interviewer, John Benson, that he would do anything—carry water, run errands, clean cages, bring food to the animals. He and Benson became lifelong friends and young Edward worked for him eight years. John Benson's faith in Father Ed certainly helped put him on the path that led to the circus world and its people.

Benson was thirty-three at the time of their first contact. He was a big man

whose father had been a wild animal trainer and menagerie owner in England. At a young age Benson was performing in the Bostock and Wombell Circus. He came to America at age eighteen as a lion wrestler. He later became chief procurer of wild and exotic animals for the Ringlings and was American representative for the Carl Hagenbeck Zoo of Hamburg, Germany. He had helped organize several zoos and was a world authority on snakes.

With Benson's first observation of an animal he could make a judgement as to the animal's ability to adapt to a zoo or a circus. He also had a reputation of making good selections of people that could

work well with animals. At the Lexington Park Zoo Edward did many odd jobs, but he was also given responsibility with the animals and assisted the animal doctors.

In 1918 Sullivan enrolled at Boston College but worked in his spare time for Benson. His college years were exciting as Benson was moving his animal importing business from a four story Hoboken, New Jersey warehouse to rural New Hampshire. For many years Benson had vacationed there and saw the advantages in locating his business there. Not only were grains and grasses more available, but it was easy to get new arrivals transported from Boston ports. Sullivan saw the erection of specially heated barns and training rings, but he also saw interested buyers come there. Two such people were Louis Roth and Mable Stark.

Sullivan inspected new animals for lice and other minor problems. While the animals were in quarantine he looked for more serious problems. At times he was in charge of transporting animals to zoos and circuses and occasionally would remain a few days to help the animals adjust to new surroundings. These stays provided the chance to see circus life first hand and to make friends with the circus people.

As a boy he aspired to become an animal trainer, but he also dreamed of becoming a priest. His college years were coming to an end when Benson made him an offer that was hard to refuse. Benson wanted Sullivan to accompany him around the world on a two year trip buying animals and searching for wild and exotic species. Benson offered a salary, a commission and all expenses.

Sullivan enrolled that fall in St. John's Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts. He was ordained in 1924 and immediately began work in Cambridge, the first of six

This drawing of Father Ed visiting with a group of circus people appeared in newspapers in the late 1940s. Pfening Archive.



Boston area assignments he would be given by the church. Once his job priorities were established he began marking his calendar with circus routes. Whenever possible he was on the lot to renew old acquaintances and to make new ones. His original intention was to be where the action was. He just naturally fell into the roll of counsellor.

He immediately noticed that when he appeared on the lot in his clerical garb, new comers would be reluctant to talk with him. Upon learning that this was because narrow minded clergy had been spreading the word that circus people were without morals and were undesirable in other ways, he decided that he would take steps to correct these misconceptions. So whenever a reporter would see him on a lot and ask why a priest was so at home there, he would switch the topic to the wholesome lives of circus people and stress the fact that circus people were family oriented. He was often quoted as say: "Circus people are decent. . . . In order to put on a decent act everyday, you must lead a decent life everyday. Your own safety and the safety of everyone else depends upon it. You can't swing upside down from a trapeze with a hangover."

In the 1930s Father Ed designed a religious medal and ordered eight fashioned of silver. Some of these were with certain persons in mind. In no time all eight had been given away and he ordered several more. He gave away St. Christopher medals freely. Reports state that he gave away hundreds in the 1940s, and by 1950 the number was in the thousands.

By the 1940s several magazines and many newspapers had published articles about Father Ed. A priest who could juggle, had a gun collection, could get behind a calliope and squeeze out a few tunes, and wasn't afraid to get in a cage with big cats made good press!

One of Father Ed's favorite stories was published in a feature article syndicated in Sunday newspapers in the late 1940s: "There was Paul Horompo, a midget clown hardly more than three feet high. Ask Paul when he prayed the hardest, and he will tell you about the time in Madison Square Garden, New York, when a vicious Bengal tiger broke loose.

"As the tiger prepared to spring, the midget made a quick confession to himself of a few sins and swung a wooden axe at the crouched cat.

"It seems impossible, but the beast was either surprised or happened to be stunned for a second or two when the light, wooden axe hit a vulnerable spot. It was long enough, however, for attendants to rope the animal and Paul was saved."

In 1940 Sullivan became a member of the Circus Fans Association and in 1941 when the organization's chairman died he was asked to replace him. Before he ac-



The circus priest helping a clown with his makeup in the 1940s. Pfening Archives.

cepted, he consulted his church superiors. He had no problem in explaining the needs of circus people. The church gave its approval.

In 1941 when American boys were being sent overseas he wished to serve as a chaplain at the front. However, in World War I he tried to enlist twice and was turned down because of a minor spinal condition. But during the second war as circus chaplain and as a priest he was able to comfort circus personnel by contacting priests who were with the armed services and getting word back that loved ones behind the lines in Europe were safe. At a time when when a large percentage of the male circus population was away, circuses were allowed to tour as Uncle Sam felt they were a morale builder. However, the circus people needed their spirits lifted and Father Ed helped do this. At the time Robert Ringling said, "Father Ed is

one of the main cogs of of the circus--the man who keeps the circus people happy."

By 1945 he had enough seniority to merit three weeks vacation and he spent most of it traveling with the Ringling show. He packed his movie camera and sport clothes so that he was prepared for any kind of job on the lot. When another show's route was near he left the big show and was on the other lot to talk with its personnel and keep abreast of their problems.

That year the Ringling-Barnum circus was playing in Fort Worth, Texas and at the suggestion of Robert Ringling, mass was said under the big top, the first mass ever to be said in a circus tent.

His friends say that the Fort Worth mass remained as one of the most memorable events of Father Ed's life. He had heard confessions the two previous nights. At 11:30 a.m. Sunday September 9, 1945, attired in his priestly garments he offered up mass on a makeshift altar set up in the big top. Eight hundred persons attended, management, performers, working men, Catholics, non-Catholics.

Sullivan did counsel non-Catholics and on occasions he would arrange for them to be married by a clergyman of their own faith, or arrange for a child's baptism in a non-Catholic setting along the route. He was respected by everyone.

Whenever possible he did things to make weddings memorable affairs. One day Ed Callahan, a CFA member, was at the Boston Garden watching some animals training when Father Ed drove up and told Ed to get in his car. They drove to the runs and picked up a young couple. The car proceeded to Father Ed's church, where Callahan was informed that he was to be a witness. He felt out of place in his sport shirt and chinos. Father Ed looked him over, took off his black suit coat and held it for his friend to put on saying, "Now you are the best dressed man in the party with your two-toned outfit." After the exchanging of vows Father Ed took the group into the rectory where he hosted a wedding breakfast.

The May-June 1947 *White Tops* listed the dates and places this dedicated man gave illustrated lectures during New England's off-season for circuses. A total of forty-eight talks were given in eight months. Any money given him went into his private fund to aid ill or out-of-work circus people. He continued to give such

talks in the years following, always stressing the wholesome lives of circus people.

When his fund was low he would pass the hat among his acquaintances. He also gave freely of his own money. When Frizzi Bartoni was hurt from a fall in the Boston Garden and had to remain behind when her circus family moved on, Father Ed visited her in the hospital bringing her flowers and circus magazines. She stated that the hospital staff was wonderful but they were not of her world. He was. Her feelings were shared by all those he visited in hospitals. He was known to fly to a distant city on his day off, visit, and fly home the same day.

Earlier—before his hair began to gray—one reporter wrote: "He is magnetic with his own share of good looks. One is prompted to think the stage lost a leading man when Father Ed entered the priesthood." Later he was described as a Cambridge-born, 200 pound, six foot Irishman with a fleck of gray in his curly hair. Another said: "He is tall, handsome, big but gentle."

He was an active member of the Circus Fans Association. When his work permitted he went to nearby tent meetings. He was the only Massachusetts fan to attend the 1961 national convention. At the annual meetings he spoke out on issues. At one convention he spoke of the need for a central fund to help indigent circus workers and a system to disperse such funds so that one person would not receive lots of help while another would get none. He spoke of the need to be friendly with foreign performers. He asked fans to extend themselves stating that people not having a good command of the language banded together because of a limited vocabulary and not because they were unfriendly.

Karl Wallenda was one foreign performer befriended by Father Ed. In an interview Karl once said, "When we first came to this country twenty-five years ago we met this young priest who became one of our first friends outside the circus. Since then he has shared all our joys and our sorrows."

One well known photograph shows Father Ed and Karl on the high wire. Father Ed had been on the ground pointing his movie camera upward while musing, "I wonder what it is like to be up there." At the invitation of Karl, Sullivan made his way to the platform while someone else operated his camera from below. Coached by Karl Father Ed placed his hands on Karl's shoulders while they inched out onto the wire, one foot at a time. Upon reaching the midpoint, Karl ordered his pupil to remove one hand, look at the

camera and smile. Later Sullivan commented, "I would have hurt Karl's feelings if I had refused."

There were other times during practice when he would participate in an act. He might juggle or try swinging on a trapeze. He even went into the big cage with the cats. "It wasn't that I was courageous," he said, "I just lacked the courage to say 'no.'"



Father Edward S. Sullivan in 1960 at a CFA convention. Marcus Ritger photo.

Those who knew Father Ed never fail to mention the man's sense of humor—even if the joke was on him. One day upon reaching a circus lot he was chuckling to himself and upon meeting an old friend related the following incident: "Yesterday I had driven as far as I wanted in one day and pulled into a motel to shower, eat and relax. While I was sitting outside enjoying myself a car drove up with a married couple and their tired fussy children. The mother took the children inside leaving her husband to struggle with the luggage. On his last trip in he noticed me sitting in a chair and looking as I had no cares in the world. As he passed me he snapped 'Coward!'"

Helen Belletti tells about the time she was going to vacation in an area where the driving was such that forty-five miles-per-hour was the limit. Father Ed gave her a St. Christopher medal for her car saying, "Remember Helen, if you go over that limit, St. Christopher gets out and walks."

Father Ed liked to be where the action was. He especially enjoyed the activities at Baraboo before the big parade in July. Fans remember him blessing the train as it began its trip to Milwaukee.

When circuses came to Boston he liked to entertain and with the help of local fans would pick up circus people and drive them to nearby Portsmouth, New Hampshire where a catered shore dinner was served on the lawn of a local fan, Ben Cook.

Sullivan became an avid motion picture enthusiast. He always had his movie camera with him when visiting a lot. Over the years he built up an extensive library of circus movies which he loved to show at fan meetings. He sometimes brought his projector and screen to the Boston Garden and after the performance would show the movies he had taken during the year. On other occasions he would bring show people to his home to see his films and memorabilia.

He was very proud of his gun collection. The guns only importance to him were as artifacts. The collection contained over one hundred weapons. It began when as a boy he had to hide anything he bought or traded in the arsenal line under his mattress or hear from his mother. In 1946 when he was elevated to a pastorate at Lanesville, a small community near Gloucester, the local paper ran a half-page article about him.

The bold type read, "THE CIRCUS PRIEST HAS A PLACE FOR HIS GUNS." A subtitle read, "Rev. Edward Sullivan can also arrange his big top collection." The article stated that when a truck full of hobby material arrived and a moving man was seen carrying in a box of guns, a native watching from the sidewalk commented, "This new priest is armed to the teeth!"

In a 1959 *White Tops* Father Ed wrote: "Only last night did I learn that the *Billboard* has printed that Father Ed Sullivan of Boston is going to write a book. I want to hereby—definitely and unequivocally—without any question say I am NOT going to write a book. Now if someone would like to report that to the *Billboard* I would appreciate it."

He went on to say that for thirty years he had held the respect of circus people and had been privileged to enjoy their confidences and he didn't want any of them to feel that he was trying to commercialize on them by publishing anything that was told to him in confidence. In his opinion it was impossible to write a book about people without having per-

sonalities creep into it. He reiterated that he had never received any compensation for any work he did for circus people. Nor did he wish to.

In 1956 he received a letter from Random House inviting him to lunch at which time they would like to discuss a book about him. He declined the luncheon engagement and stated that he did not wish such a book to be written.

Father Ed loved his circus family. But he also loved his other family, his parishioners. He made it a point to understand them and know them. For instance when he became pastor of Star of the Sea Church, where many of his flock were fishermen, he went out in their boats. And he learned to navigate. He wanted to understand their problems and perils.

He served as chaplain of the fire departments in the communities he served. His car was recognizable by a red flasher firemen had given him. They also equipped his car with a two-way radio, enabling him to get to disasters without undue difficulty.

As he acquired more seniority, he was able to spend some January days in Florida. He was in Venice for the opening of



Father Ed and a group of altar boys blessing the Ringling Bros. & Barnum and Bailey Circus train as it pulled out of Venice, Florida in the late 1960s. Circus World Museum collection.

the Ringling-Barnum blue show in 1970. While he was blessing the train as it left for St. Petersburg he suffered a heart attack and died at age 71. He died as he would have wanted among his friends and where the action was.

The Rev. Edward S. Sullivan was an exemplary circus fan, providing support

and friendship to all circus people. His contribution to the circus is one for all fans to strive to achieve.

In 1985 two young persons came to a meeting of the Father Ed Tent, an official unit of the Circus Fans Association of America. They asked, "Who was Father Ed?"

It was decided by tent members that a clipping book be created that would be available to introduce a new generation of circus fans to Father Ed. For forty-five years this devoted man took movies of circus people and spoke of their whole-

someness. He wanted the public to see them as they were. For forty-five years reporters took pictures of him. Now these pictures and their captions help show Father Ed as he was, magnetic, enthusiastic, friendly, handsome, a man who gave unstinting of his time and energy to serve other people.

The Father Ed Sullivan movie collection is now in safe hands at the Circus World Museum.

A version of this paper was presented at the 1989 CHS convention.

JOIN

THE CIRCUS FANS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Membership includes a
subscription to the bi-monthly
magazine entitled

THE WHITE TOPS

For more information contact:

Dale A. Riker
Secretary-Treasurer
P. O. Box 3187
Flint, MI 48502

WOULD YOU LIKE
TO OWN A CIRCUS?

THE CIRCUS MODEL BUILDERS INTERNATIONAL

SAYS YOU CAN

If you love the circus and are a fan or historian, then
you have taken the first steps to becoming a Circus
Model Builder.

For details contact:

Sally Weitlauf
Secretary-Treasurer
347 Lonsdale Ave.
Dayton, OH 45419

Subscription for THE LITTLE CIRCUS WAGON is \$19.50
per year from above address.

ELEPHANTS FOR BARNUM

BY STUART THAYER

In his autobiography, P. T. Barnum speaks of projecting "a great traveling museum and menagerie" in 1849. He tells that he induced Seth B. Howes to take charge of it; Barnum, Howes and Sherwood E. Stratton becoming equal partners in the venture.¹

Stratton was the father of the ubiquitous Tom Thumb and was no doubt looking for ways to invest his son's for-

longer of interest to his metropolitan audience and sending them on tour was a way of getting a few more dollars out of them.

A decision was made to send an expedition to Ceylon to purchase a group of

Fig. 1. Capturing Barnum's elephants in Ceylon. Circus World Museum collection.

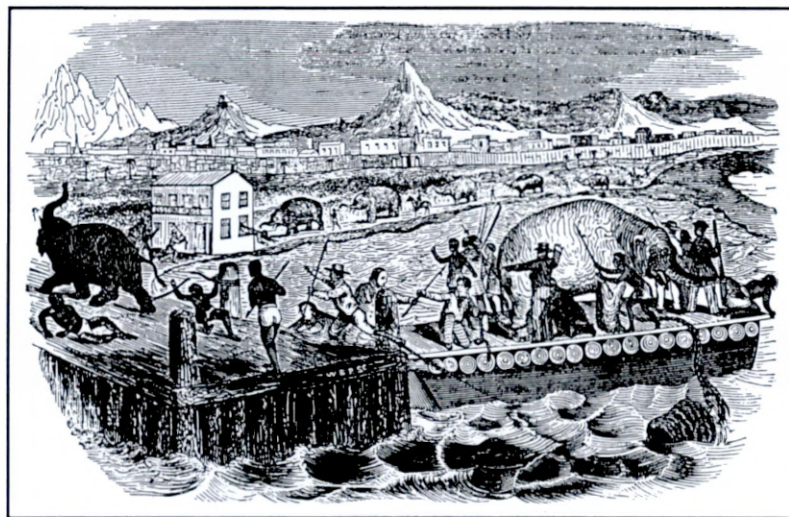
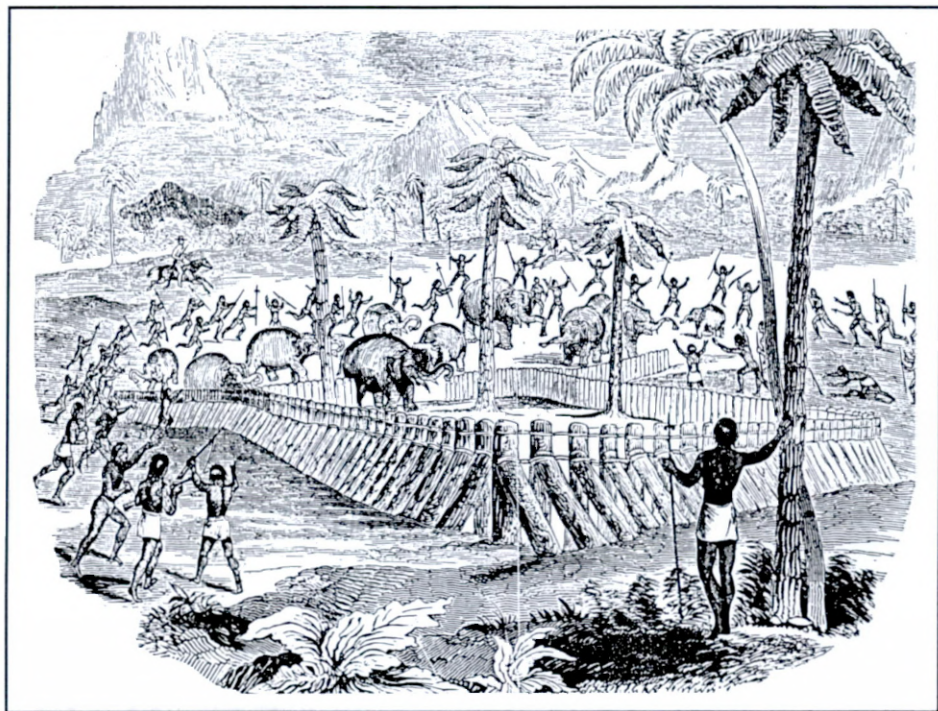


Fig. 2. Getting the elephants on ship-board. Circus World Museum collection.

elephants, which were to be a feature of the new show. Stebbings June and George Nutter were hired for this task.

June (1811-1861) was a brother of John J. and James M. June and the only one of that family to sign the Zoological Institute agreement in 1835. It is generally assumed that he was connected with June, Titus, Angevine & Co. before then, though no solid evidence places him with the firm. In 1836 and 1837, he managed a unit of the Institute; in the later year it was titled S. B. June's Circus.

George Nutter was chosen to accompany June because of his years of experience as an elephant handler. His best known assignment was as keeper of Raymond & Waring's animals, Virginius and Pizarro. It was Nutter who set out in a row boat in the Delaware River to attempt to save the two bulls when they were drowned swimming from Philadelphia to Camden, New Jersey in 1847. It was Raymond & Waring's record of four elephants on one show that Howes and Barnum were attempting to best in acquiring a dozen elephants.

They chartered the bark *Regatta*, Captain Pratt, and sailed from New York in May 1850, expecting to return in a year. Their landfall in Ceylon was at Galle, where they sought to purchase tame elephants. This was in early October. Heavy rains had ruined the road system of the island and all the domesticated elephants were being used to repair the infrastructure, thus none were for sale. They decided that they would have to capture wild animals and, with 160 locals, proceeded into the jungle to do so. It was near Anuradhapura that they began the process.

Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Com-

panion of New York was most interested in the project and may have sent an artist to report it. If not, drawings were made from June and Nutter's descriptions and we use them for illustrations.

The first of these (Fig. 1), dated June 21, 1851, shows the corral into which the wild elephants were driven by the beaters. Eleven beasts were captured of which one was stolen, thus the expedition herded ten animals back to Galle, where the *Regatta* awaited them. Because the ship was some distance from shore the elephants had to be transported to it by lighter. One elephant tried to escape at this point and our second picture (Fig. 2) shows this event. He was recaptured and loaded with the others.

The process of capturing and loading the animals took three months and four days. The *Ragatta* consumed 112 days in returning to New York harbor. Stops were made at the Cape of Good Hope and at St. Helena. Five hundred tons of hay had been deposited on the trip eastward. Two elephants died on the voyage.

They arrived in New York on May 4, 1851, with nine animals, one of which was

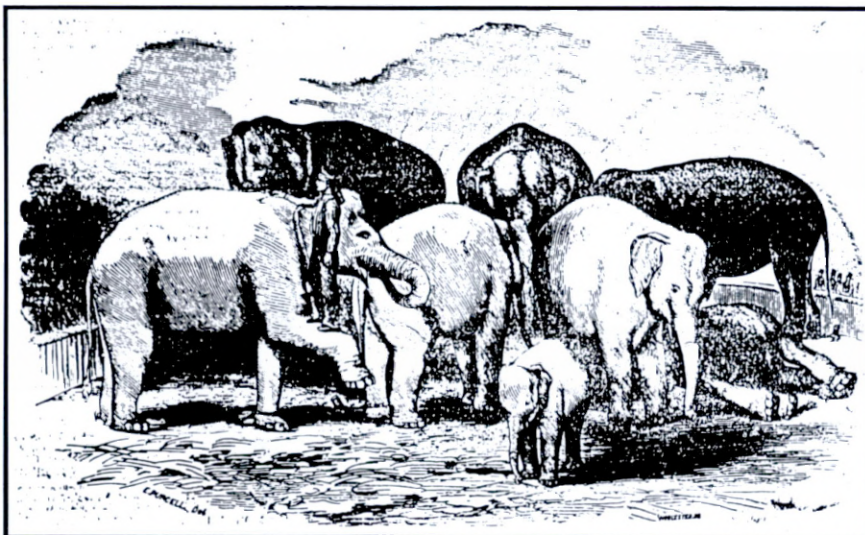


Fig. 3. Barnum's elephants on the Asiatic Caravan. Circus World Museum collection.

a calf but three feet, six inches high. The final illustration (Fig. 3) shows eight elephants after they had joined the show. We are confident that there were actually nine.²

Barnum's new "Car of Juggernaut," one of the huge parade wagons, similar to Spalding's Apollonicon, that were briefly popular in the early 1850's, was unveiled in New York with a ten-elephant hitch that marched up Broadway in the first

week of May. The ten were made up of the eight new arrivals plus two owned by Howes.

The first performance of the "Asiatic Caravan" was presented in Newark, New Jersey, on May 5, 1851. From then until the last performance, in Brooklyn on October 20, 1854, the elephants were a heavily advertised feature of the show. The calf, not surprisingly named "Tom Thumb," was especially popular from press reports

Present knowledge indicates that the elephants were named Pizarro, Mogul, Fanny, Canada, Jenny, Mary and Mickey, leaving one name a mystery. At the auction of the caravan property in November, 1854, Seth B. Howes bought the lot and used some of them on his circus and menagerie in 1855.

FOOTNOTES

1. P. T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs* (1886 edition), pp 132-133.
2. *New York Weekly Universe*, 10 May 1851.

A U C T I O N

ONE-OF-A-KIND SCARCE ITEMS OFFERED FOR THE BEST BID
WITHIN TWO WEEKS AFTER RECEIPT OF THIS MAGAZINE

1882-1900 Route book Ringling Bros. Shows, 97 pages, 4 1/2 x 7", hard bound. cover faded, spine cracked, otherwise very good.

1891 A History of Hunting's New RR Shows, 54 pages, 4 x 6", paperback, very good.

1892 Route book Ringling Bros. Shows, 147 pages, 4 1/2 x 7", leatherette binding much worn.

1894 "Beneath White Tops," Ringling Bros. Route book, 178 pages, hard bound, cover quite worn, contents good.

1897 "The Circus Annual," Ringling Bros. Route book, 136 pages, 7 x 10", very good.

1900 "A Souvenir and Dedicated tot the White Tent Followers," Forepaugh-Sells Route book, 82 pages, 5 x 8", hard back, good.

1903-1904 "Day By Day with Barnum & Bailey," 111 pages, 7 x 10 1/2", leatherette cover, good.

1906 Barnum & Bailey, "Annual Route Book & Illustrated Tours." 128 pages, 7 x 10 1/2", leatherette cover quite worn, contents good.

1923 John Robinson, 100th Annual Tour Route book, 22 pages, 7 x 10 1/2", paperback, very good.

BOOK John Glenroy's *Ins & Outs of Circus Life Or 42 Years Travel*, 1885, M. M. Wing, Boston Edition, slight dampness stain some pages below printed words, otherwise very good.

It is difficult to describe material so old. If not satisfied moeny will be refunded. Send \$1.00 cash or stamps for complete list of circus items at firm price.

Betty Schmid

485 Sleepy Hollow Rd. Pittsburgh, PA 15228 Phone (412) 341-4597

Circus Colossus. Seabos Productions (Bob and Sandi Sabia). Forty-seven minutes, color, VHS only. \$49.85.

Bob Sabia who pleasantly surprised the vast fraternity of circus video fans a year ago with *Circus Serendipity* featuring rare films from the 1920s and 30s from the camera of the late Walter Buckingham has done it again, this time with films from the late William H. Judd collection which are owned by the New Britain, Connecticut, Youth Museum. Through the cooperation of the museum's curator these marvelous films were made available for this video.

Bill Judd, a former CFA president, was an excellent cinematographer and the Sabias have done a first class job with the video. It covers the Ringling-Barnum show from 1939 to 1956, and is arranged chronologically with subtitles indicating the date and location.

The video is all in color and many questions, even arguments, concerning the color schemes of the physical equipment will be answered. Pictured are green Macks used in 1941 including the canvas trucks. In 1944 all trucks, including Caterpillar tractors are red. In other seasons the latter are yellow. The different color schemes used for the bell wagon, Two Jesters steam calliope, and other parade wagons used in specs will be of prime interest to many viewers.

In fact the video has something for every circus lover's particular taste, whether it be the physical set-up on the lot, the trains, spec vehicles with human and animal participants all in costume, performers or clowns. It's all here. Elephant nuts will have their fill as the herd is pictured for nearly every season coming on the lot or enroute to it, working during morning set-up, and later decked out in all the elaborate spec trap-pings prominent during these years on the Big One.

The tape is advertised as the finest circus video ever offered and I can't argue with that. Indeed, it contains some of the best footage I've ever seen.

A complete description of the contents is impossible within the confines of this review but a quick summary of the highlights is in order.

It begins with the baggage and cage wagons moving on to and about the lot in 1939. Walter McClain's famous herd of

"working elephants" are shown hitched in teams moving the show's cages. McClain's herd on the Al G. Barnes-Sells-Floto Circus through 1938 moved over to Ringling-Barnum the next year. Many steel tired baggage wagons are pictured as not all had as yet been equipped with dual pneumatics. The old time stake gang is in action on some of the minor tents. Finally there are nice scenes of the principal spec in the backyard.

Next comes a truly outstanding picture

ly styled midway with jillions of flags in use. And again we are treated to a look at Holidays, another John Ringling North spec.

The video then moves to 1943 and the Robert Ringling era, and the rather unusual new type spec, Hold Your Horses, which featured an old time street parade moving around the track, although all spec scenes were filmed in the backyard, as inadequate lighting and the limited film speeds of that day made inside filming in color virtually impossible. The viewer will be pleased with the sight of the several open cages pulled by draft stock and he'll fall out of his seat when the newly built Liberty bandwagon comes into view. These spec scenes give a rare look at the color of the cages since they were usually draped in canvas traps

until moved inside the menagerie.

The 1944 views will bring a lump in the throat of everyone old enough to remember as cameraman Judd was in the rail yards at Hartford, July 5, 1944, the day before the tragic fire. He filmed the unloading of the flat cars and it will be noted a new color scheme of yellow with red lettering is in use, replacing the aluminum (silver) which had been the rule since 1933.

Following the fire the Big One avoided New England for the next three seasons, but Judd's collection contains an excellent film of the show taken in 1945, probably in Buffalo. It is a gem as the spec that season featured three famous old parade wagons, Five Graces, Lion and

Snake and Gladiator and Lion. They were pulled by hitches of draft horses but the sunbrust wheels had been replaced by dual pneumatics. Despite this, they still made a spectacular sight.

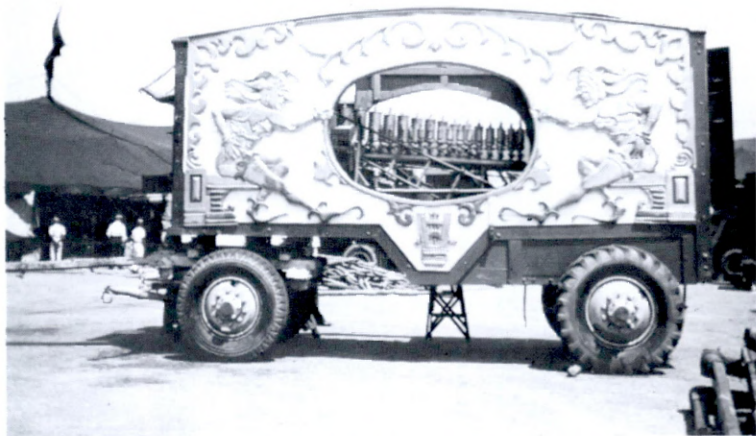
In 1948 Judd was again on the lot at Plainfield, Connecticut to capture on film the first season of the second John Ringling North era and he filmed all of the highlights. This segment shows the morning set-up and extra good shots of the performing horses in their tents, and concludes with a sweeping lot panorama.

Many costumes and spec floats used in the movie *Greatest Show on Earth* will be

STAR BACK REVIEW



of the great 1941 show which the late Bill Woodcock, Sr. once told me was physically the largest circus he had ever seen. All phases of the set-up are there. Also interesting shots of the cookhouse in opera-



The white and gold Two Jesters calliope in 1941 is shown in the video.

tion, including the automatic dishwasher. The piece d'resistance has to be the extensive coverage of the Old King Cole spec in the backyard and moving in and out of the the big top. Vehicles shown include the Two Jesters steam calliope in white and gold making its first ever appearance on Ringling-Barnum. Many panorama views of the huge lot layout make the viewer agree with Woodcock that this was the biggest.

In 1942 there are good shots of the new-

recognized in 1951 scenes. Interesting shots of the 1952 and 1953 show are seen, including carriages of the equine spec.

Finally there appears a few shots of the last canvas season taken in Plainfield, Connecticut in 1956. There is the new blue and white stripped midway layout, and vividly pictured is the large number of horses and fifty plus elephant herd moving on the streets to the lot.

At this point one expects the tape to end, however there is a surprise bonus, a couple of black and white clips, the first covering the fifteen car Robbins Bros. Circus of 1938. Shown is the advertising car, a store front filled with lithos, then considerable coverage of the lot with many tents, wagons and the off beat little Fordson tractor which often pulled the steam calliope in parade. Fans of this popular show will rejoice in getting another video of it to go along with the well distributed reels of Denny Berkery and Ted Deppish.

The Sabia video concludes with some rare black and white footage taken in 1938 of the World Bros. Circus. The prize shot is of the huge male elephant Nemo with a fine set of tusks.

These World Bros. shots are something I never knew existed. Actually the same can be said for all of the Judd films in the video. We knew that Bill Judd bequeathed his movie collection to the New Britain museum but were not aware of the contents and most of us would never been able to see them without the efforts of Bob Sabia and the Youth Museum's curator of exhibits, Debbie Pfeifferberger. Our thanks to them. I highly and most enthusiastically recommend this video. Joseph T. Bradbury

Felix Adler as Old King Cole in the 1941 Ringling-Barnum spec.



Annals of the American Circus, Volume II, 1830-1847 by Stuart Thayer (Seattle: Peanut Butter Publishing, 1986).

Some people mis-spent their youth in pool halls and taverns. I wasted mine at the Ohio Historical Society gleefully reading early 19th century newspapers, at first for no purpose other than the joy of learning about the circus. Eventually my research became focused. After a short time I compiled a list of troupes not on C. G. Sturtevant's list of shows then being published in *White Tops*. Soon after, I started gathering information on the famous elephants of the period—pachyderms with fabulous names like Virginius, Pizarro, Siam, and Hannibal. Those triumphs behind me, I began collecting data toward a history of the menagerie business before the Civil War. While this project never got past the note taking stage, it left me somewhat knowledgeable about early field shows. In my more vain moments I even fancied myself an expert on the period.

At least I did until I read this book. It is—as my children would say—awesome. Based on years of hard-core, heavy-duty research in primary sources including over a hundred thousand newspapers, this volume completely revises our conception of the circus from 1830 to 1847 by fleshing out shows and showman of which we had only a shadowy knowledge, and by making us aware of troupes and troupers we didn't even know existed. Thayer's incisive comments on specialized subjects will further enhance his reputation as the premier scholar of the antebellum era if not all of circus history. His two and three paragraph excursions into such disparate topics as brass bands, lion training, big show seating, and many others are simply fascinating. So great is his mastery of this material that he answers questions the rest of us didn't know enough to ask.

The book is divided into two sections. The first is a 154 page interpretive narrative tracing the circus and most menageries from 1830 to 1847. The second part is a 205 page appendix which lists all the known vital information on each show including personnel,

CIRCUS.



Positively the Last Night!

THE Proprietor announces to the Ladies and Gentlemen of the Borough of Lebanon and its vicinity that he will appear on the 24th and 25th inst. at the following place:

Wednesday Evening August 24th, 1832.

GRAND DISPLAY

By a number of horses, which will be brought to the city by the 24th inst. and will be exhibited in the most complete manner.

HORSEMANSHIP.

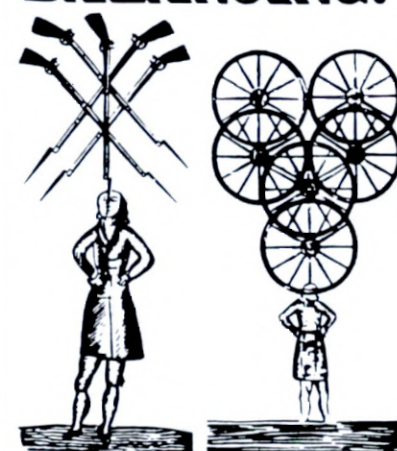
By Mr. W. H. Howes and 2 others, who will perform a variety of feats of strength and skill.

Darby and Joan.

Horseman'ship

By Mr. W. H. Howes and 2 others, who will perform a variety of feats of strength and skill.

BALANCING.



With Paper Tables, Four Wagons, Wickets, and Five Men, with the price of the largest tent, 1000 yds long.

HORSEMANSHIP.

By Mr. Howes, who will go through his various abilities, without saddle or bridle.

Mr. Howes will appear on the 24th inst. at the following place: Wednesday Evening August 24th, 1832.

The whole to conclude with the Clown, turned Barber or wax half an hour and I will shave you in ten minutes.

Show opens at 7 o'clock. Performance to commence at 8 o'clock. Admission 25 cents. Children 10 cents. 100 yds long.

Handbill used by Nathan Howes' Circus in 1832. Lebanon Historical Society, Lebanon, Pennsylvania.

key animals, and route. Alone, each would be a major contribution to our knowledge of the circus. Together they give us for the first time a sense of the size, structure and scope of the business during this seventeen year period.

The troupes of the 1830s bore little resemblance to the shows that followed them. These aggregations were tiny by later standards, requiring only one or two wagons to carry the equipment. The ring stock was driven over the road, and

the performers drove their own buggies or rode in overland wagons provided by management. The performance was mainly horsemanship, although many other acts we associate with the circus, juggling for instance, were commonly seen.

Center poles were about 15 to 20 feet high and purchased each day rather than carried over the road. The ring was surrounded by a wooden fence about three feet high and entered by a gate. Seating was limited or non-existent; most of the audience stood. The performers donned their costumes at the hotel and rode in parade to the tent, followed by the audience. From this humble beginning came the mammoth spectacles that rolled down the streets fifty years later.

The first generation of American-born showman reached maturity during this time. Their innovations influence the industry to this day. The first bombastic rhetoric in advertising, the first seat collapse, the first route book, the first fancy bandwagon, the first bareback somersault, even the first date tag all occurred in this period.

It was a transition period during which the once dominate menageries became more like circuses to forestall their decline and eventually became an adjunct to them. A time of strong moral opposition to shows, Vermont and Connecticut banned circuses within their borders as did cities in several other states. The depression of 1837-1843 almost decimated the industry. Seven of the sixteen circuses on tour in 1838 failed, and only ten shows took to the road in 1843.

The great showmen of the era—some long forgotten—are given their due. James Raymond was the business's most powerful figure, having an interest in at least 50 different shows from 1830 to 1847. He had as many as four shows on tour simultaneously, and from 1843 until his death in 1854 only one menagerie was not



Levi J. North pictured in 1843. Arthur Saxon collection.

under his control. Only John Ringling ever came close to dominating the business to the extent Raymond did, and Ringling's reign lasted less than three years. Another important showman was the largely forgotten J. Purdy Brown who put the performance under canvas, combined the circus and menagerie, and may have originated minstrelsy.

Thayer gives us the most comprehensive account yet of the rise and fall

of the Zoological Institute. He concludes these showman "shaped the American circus into its traditional form," which certainly underscores their importance. He rejects the standard interpretation that the organization failed as a result of the panic of 1837, suggesting instead that these Westchester County entrepreneurs found it difficult to operate under corporate authority, citing among other evidence the withdrawal of Aaron Turner and Nathan Howes after the group's first year.

In spite of the avalanche of new material it contains, this volume is—and I suspect Thayer would agree—the first, not the last, word on the subject. As thorough as the author was, the book is by no means definitive. For example, he has uncovered no information for Nathan Howes, certainly a key figure, for 1830 and 1831, nor any for Aaron Turner in 1843. Still to be inspected are court records, town council minutes, tax data, census information, diaries, wills and dozens of other categories of documents that preserve the minutia of a century and a half ago. Tens of thousands of newspapers from the period remain unread. A glance at the route information in the appendix will indicate how many dates are yet to be discovered. In fact, a number of shows have only a handful of recorded dates, some only one or two. There is still lots more to do.

Few other books have advanced our knowledge of the circus as much. Indeed, quantum leaps in scholarship are rare in any field of historical inquiry. Before Thayer all we had were the superficial and error riddled accounts by Chindahl, Greenwood, Vail, May, Kunzog, and a few others. It was a bit like reading a political history of the United States for 1830-1847 that left out some of the presidents. Now, thanks to Thayer, we know who the players were and what they did. And that is a major achievement. Fred D. Pfening III

CIRCUS REPORT

America's Favorite Circus Weekly

Published by Don Marcks

525 Oak St., El Cerrito, CA 94530-3699

Subscription rates per year: U. S. delivery \$30; Canada and Mexico \$40
Overseas surface mail \$45; Airmail \$85

1887
"A dollar Show for a Dime" was the promise made to Topeka by "The Big Barnum of Ten Cent Shows," Sam MacFlinn's Hippolympiad which settled down on the hay market lot at Fourth and Jackson Streets for a week's run of two shows a day, beginning May 2.

By MacFlinn's own admission there was nothing mediocre about the Hippolympiad. On the bill were:

"The Greatest Lady Acrobats
 The best Gymnasts
 The Most Beautiful, Costly and
 Highly
 EDUCATED HORSES."

And that was not all, for MacFlinn also had "The most wonderful Contortionists; the one and only Riding Mandril Monkey in the world; the most beautiful Ponies; the greatest Riding Dogs; the most marvelously Learned Goats; the only Educated Mules in the business; the only Show that presents New Ideas and Original Acts; the only Dime Show that has a presentable

BRASS AND REED BAND."

"Yesterday afternoon," according to the *Daily Commonwealth*, May 4, "the circus band brayed loudly and wailingly almost under the court house window, where Judge Guthrie was hearing a case. He ordered the bailiffs to stop it, in language forcible yet simple. It was a conflict between the judiciary and the city, as the latter had licensed the show. The judiciary prevailed and the band stopped."

The circus world was not completely alien to Guthrie for his daughter was married to Tom McGarth, a ticket seller on the Sells Brothers' show. When Oklahoma was opened for settlement the judge helped found a town that was named in his honor.

Following the opening the *Capital* reported that, "Sam MacFlinn's great show opened last night on the corner of Fourth and Jackson Streets, to a packed house, and gave one of the best entertainments ever witnessed in Topeka; chaste, neat, clean and tidy. It was an agreeable surprise."

As the story continued the hand of the press agent showed itself. "The exhibition is without a doubt the most entertaining and pleasing ever seen in the country, and gave universal satisfaction. Its seating capacity is 3,000, and we will assure them a fine week's business. as the performance is adapted for ladies and children, for the small price of 10 cents, one dime. Performances every afternoon and night dur-

ing the week. Doors open at 1:30 and 7 p.m."

The press agent in a story published in the *Democrat* pointed out that, "It is the

show now exhibiting at the corner of Fourth and Jackson Streets, called on the *Democrat* today. The Doctor is one of the oldest showmen in the United States; has traveled in well nigh every state in the union, and has a great fund of reminiscences of show business. The performances given by the company are highly meritorious."

MacFlinn closed in Topeka on May 7, and disappeared from the Kansas press.

On May 8 Topeka was without a circus, but on May 9 the void was filled by Howe's New London 10 cent Shows which opened for a week's run on the corner of Fourth and Jefferson Streets.

Featured was "Lalla Rookh" the wonderful performing elephant, assisted by the comical clown elephant 'Bolivar,' Professor Leon's school of performing dogs and Professor Mayo's educated ponies and mules." The show presented a parade at 10:00 a.m. on the 9th. None of the papers described the procession, but the *Commonwealth* thought it "very creditable."

The *Capital* in a review, probably the work of a press agent, reported May 10, that "There are forty people with the show, all of whom are artists in their particular lines.

"The reserved seats will accommodate about 2,000 people, all of which are carpeted [the seats, not the people], making it a comfort to remain until the excellent performance is entirely finished. . . .

Last evening the crowd which witnessed the pleasing performance, was estimated at 6,000."

In another column the *Capital* described the show as first class.

"Doctor" James L. Thayer, at age 57, was the owner of Sam MacFlinn's Hippolympiad in 1887. Pfening Archives.

"It seems that ten cent circuses are all the go this season, but there is quite a difference even in ten cent circuses; for instance Howe's show which exhibits here this week, is 100 percent better than the ten cent show we had last week. It is a fact that the show now in the city is a great improvement over some of the circuses Topeka has had in the past

THE ONLY TRIPLE-HORNED UNICORN

Chapter 1 Part One

NO RUSTY, HOARY-HEADED CHESTNUTS

By Orin Copple King

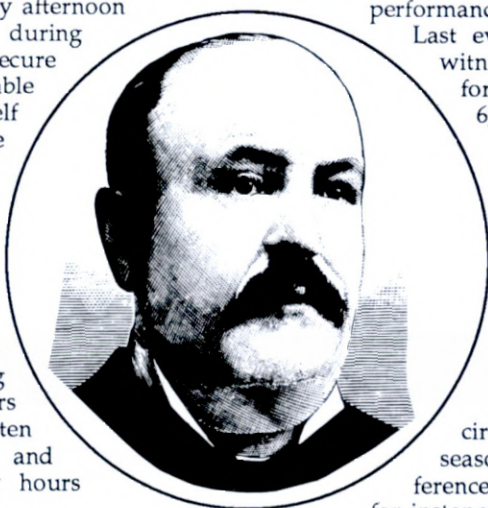
Copyright 1990 Orin Copple King

place of amusement for the ladies and children of Topeka at the present time. Price of admission only 10 cents. The character and quality of the performance would justify five times the charge." In conclusion the press agent expressed the opinion that everyone should, "Go early every afternoon and evening during the week to secure a comfortable seat for yourself and the little ones."

Ten cents seems such a small amount one hundred years later, but in Topeka in 1887 the men operating the street cars were earning ten cents an hour and working sixty hours per week.

Was Sam MacFlinn the owner of the Hippolympiad?

The *Democrat*, May 3, carried the following: "Dr. James Thayer, an elderly gentleman and proprietor of the dime



which claimed to be first class and charged the regular prices. Howe's show is deserving of the patronage of our city."

The *Democrat*, May 13, stated that, "Howe's London two-ring circus will be open only today and tomorrow. If you haven't already seen the finest and largest ten cent show on earth, now is the proper time to do so. These real treats only come once in a man's life time and to miss seeing such a show is to regret it for all time to come."

Not everything went smoothly in Howe's Topeka engagement. "The case of the state vs Conrad, one of Howe's showmen, was tried before Judge Searle," according to the *State Journal*, May 12. "Conrad is accused of slapping one of the numerous small boys in the face and then kicking him off the circus grounds. This was a feature not advertised and the energetic youth had Conrad arrested for introducing such novelties. The outcome was never reported."

As the season progressed the show added features and by the time of the Lawrence appearance, July 25 and 26, was using newspaper display advertising and was now Howe's New London Big 25-Cent Shows. In addition to the two rings there was now an elevated stage.

At Lawrence there were still "the 40 Arenic Stars 40, and the 20 Magnificent Blooded Trick Horses 20" seen in Topeka in the ten cent days. Lalla Rookh was now "The Oldest and Largest Trick Elephant living, being 110 y'rs of age."

Mentioned by name in every subsequent ad was Andy Sweeney, "The Samsonian Phenomenon, who catches a 32-pound Cannon Ball shot from a 500 pound Cannon." It was, of course, no ordinary cannon but one "formerly used in the Battle of Shiloh."

On the advance was Harry Gray, "the well known Lawrence boy," whose many friends were glad to see him.

After the show played Strong City, August 1, the *Chase County Leader*, Cottonwood Falls, two miles from Strong City, reported that,

"Howe's New London Show.

"The performance given by the above company, last Monday afternoon was one of the best ever given under canvas in this section. The price of admission being only 25 cents, most people adopted that as a standard by which to gage the performance. In this all were agreeably disappointed. The number and novelty of the acts introduced compared favorably with the highest priced companies, and in many cases surpassed them. The riding by Barclay was excellent, and the cannon act of Sweeney [was] unsurpassed. The secret by which the London is able to give such an excellent performance for so

small an admission fee is because superfluous advertising schemes and outside displays are abandoned and the expense thus saved is put into the performance."

Harry Bell, a resident of Strong City, "was agreeably surprised Monday by meeting with three of his old chums of former days. The persons alluded to are

HOWE'S NEW LONDON SHOWS

Prof. Mayo's School of Trained Horses and Mules!

TWO SHOWS in ONE for ONE ADMISSION



Miss NELLIE MONROE
Queen of the Side-Saddle, performing at each performance for ladies' entertainment a Kentucky Thoroughbred Steeple Chase.



LEON'S DOG CIRCUS
At once interesting and amusing - Your favorite Professor.

REMEMBER, WE GIVE MORE FREE SHOW THAN MANY OTHER SHOWS EXHIBIT ALTOGETHER.



FRED BARCLAY
CHAMPION HURDLE INDIAN RIDER OF AMERICA.



FRED MACART
AMERICAN GREATEST STUNTSMAN

30 FIRST-CLASS 30 PERFORMERS



FRANK BERNARDO
AMERICAN GREATEST STUNTSMAN



30 FIRST-CLASS 30 PERFORMERS

Mlle. AURITA
Of Paris, France, the most wonderful Tight-Rope Dancer and Aerial Artist ever seen in this country.



MASTER FRANK MACART
A FUNNY CLOWNS headed by Lew DeBonaire & Bert Lean



DYNAMITE & CALAMITY JANE

NEW LONDON SHOWS AND SCHOOL OF EQUINES

DON'T FAIL TO SEE THE FREE EXHIBITION
AT THE SHOW GROUNDS, EVERY DAY AT 1 P. M. FREE TO ALL
Two Shows Daily. Doors open at 1 & 7. Commencing at 2 & 5 P. M.
10c Admission Only 10c

Great Western Printing Co. 511-513 Market St. St. Louis

Herald used by Howe's New London Circus in 1887. Pfening Archives.

Fred Manchard, first clown; Ned West, song and dance artist and Fred Barclay, the famous bareback rider, all of whom are with Howe's Great London Show. Barclay as a bareback rider is a daisy 'and don't you forget it.'"

An ad in the *Peabody Gazette*, July 28, touted the exhibitions of August 2, carried the following names:

"Miss Nell Monroe, Queen of the Side Saddle.

"Pr. Chas. Moore's Dog Circus.

"Maretta Sisters, Flying Trapeze.

"Fred Barclay, Famous Hero Horseman and Greatest of Living Hurdle Riders.

"Fred Macart, Premier Equillibrist.

"Bernardo, Howard, Memhard and DeBonaire, America's Greatest Gymnasts.

"Mlle Anrita, The most wonderful tight rope dancer in this country.

"Four Funny Clowns, Headed by Lew Debonaire and Bob Memhard, the Merriest Clowns in the World, with their Matchless Mules-Dynamite and Calamity Jim."

Andy Sweeney received more space than any other member of the aggregation. Sweeney's act consisted of throwing and catching cannon balls of 100 pounds, concluding with his catch of a cannon ball fired from a cannon. The cannon ball used in the finale of his act which had formerly weighed 32 pounds had shrunk to a mere 20 pounds, but the show demonstrated its faith in Sweeney by issuing a \$500 challenge "to any athlete in the world who thinks he can catch the small ball fired with the same charge of powder."

The ad admonished the public "DON'T FAIL TO SEE THE FREE EXHIBITION" without telling what the offering would be.

"Howe's Sawdust Comedians" was the heading on a handout run August 4, in the *Hutchinson Weekly Democrat* for the exhibitions of August 8 and 9. "Any clown that springs a rusty, hoary headed chestnut with whiskers on it, is subject to a fine of ten dollars."

The clown contingent was headed by Bobby Memhardt, "noted English pantomimic and acrobatic clown who will tickle the resibilities [sic] of the audience with many novel tricks and wonderful contortions. Lew DeBonaire, one of the brightest jesters that ever donned cap and bells, will vocalize the latest comic songs--Tell rib-tickling stories and perform his precocious little clown elephant 'Bolivar.' Judge Brannon, the Chesterfield of Shakesperian wits, will introduce some remarks on the Inter-State Commerce bill, growth of Hutchinson, etc., etc. Six high priests of Momus will participate in the revels."

By the time the show had reached Hutchinson another feature appeared in the advertising, "The Earl Sisters, The Smallest Aerial Artists in the World in Thrilling Flights Through Space from the Dome of the Mammoth Canvas."

The *Democrat* on August 11 praised the Howe show for its splendid program which was a surprise to the people of Hutchinson who expected far less from a 25 cent entertainment. One feature of the show, one that seldom received praise for

any circus, was the concert.

"The greatest surprise to everyone was the concert," the *Democrat* reported. "Usually this is a faked up arrangement that disgusts everyone, but with Howe it was different. He has in his employ fully a dozen people expressly for this branch of his entertainment and a great many patrons pronounced the concert even superior to the big show. It is worth anyone's time and money to patronize Howe's show."

The Howe show came into Hutchinson eight days ahead of Doris & Colvin which was billed for August 17.

At El Dorado there was again close competition, with the Howe show exhibiting August 15, and Doris & Colvin on August 20. Neither company suffered from the competition.

A handout in the El Dorado *Democrat* August 11 may have stretched the truth a mite when it claimed that "It is a complete, perfect and lavishly sumptuous revival of the classic Grecian Olympian games." Since none of the audience had ever seen the ancient games on Mt. Olympus, who could refute the claim?

According to the listings in John D. Draper's article in the January-February 1978 *Bandwagon*, the Howe show was the property of L. H. French and W. C. Monroe.

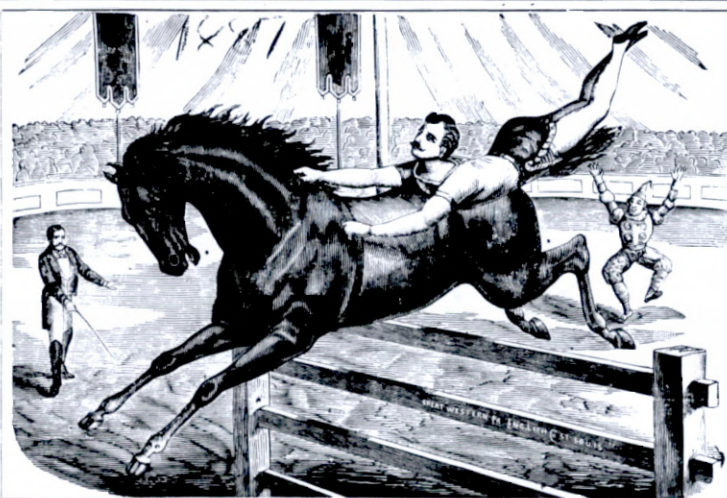
Not all of the Kansas dates are known, but in addition to the preceding exhibitions, the show also played Halstead, August 10; Eureka, August 16 and Toronto, August 17.

French and Monroe did not own the only Howe's Great London Shows circulating in Kansas in the summer of 1887. There was also Sieber & Howe's Great London Circus, Menagerie and Museum.

The Sieber show was a Topeka aggregation owned by George Sieber who for several years operated in partnership with J. M. Barry. The show opened in an unknown town on May 16.

The Howe's New London 25-Cent Shows of French and Monroe received excellent notices in every town they played, but that was not the case with the Sieber show.

Wa-Keeney was played July 19 under the title of Sieber & Company's Universal Shows and Colossal Museum. After the show had come and gone, the Wa-Keeney *Tribune*, of July 22 ran the following: "Sieber [sic] & Co's Colossal Museum that exhibited here last Tuesday, consisted of a masculine-appearing woman, a big snake and a Punch and Judy performance. Their



WAIT FOR THE BIGGEST OF ALL 10 CENT SHOWS

Fred Barclay, champion hurdle and Indian rider of America, was pictured in the 1887 Howe's New London Shows herald. Pfening Archives.

Universal Shows were very ordinary trapeze and horizontal bar performances. It was also accompanied by the wheel-of-fortune fiend, who, not being satisfied with gulling the suckers who tried their chances of getting a small fortune for fifty cents, passed a bogus twenty-dollar bill at Mrs. Benedict's restaurant. The bill was not known to be worthless until she went to the bank the next afternoon. Mrs. B. and her son, Charlie, went to Ellis, where the Universal Colossal was to exhibit that day, but the wheel-of-fortune man could not be found."

At Ellis for the exhibitions of July 20, the billing was for Sieber & Howe's Great London Circus, Menagerie and Museum. The only newspaper advertising consisted of single sentences or short paragraphs in the Ellis *Review* of July 15:

"Remember the Great London Circus in Ellis next Wednesday.

"Circus in town Wednesday.

"Coming! Keep your eye on day and date. Sieber & Howe's Great London Circus, Menagerie and Museum at Ellis, Wednesday, July 20.

"Don't fail to see the princes of all bar performers, the De Castro Bros. To be seen only with Sieber & Howe's Great London Shows at Ellis, Wednesday, July 20.

"The only big show that will visit our city this summer coming in all its grandeur. Five big shows in one at Ellis, Wednesday, July 20. Two grand performances afternoon and evening."

The *Review* reported, July 22, that, "The great and only circus' visited Ellis last Wednesday as announced. It was a kind of one-horse combination but attracted good crowds both afternoon and evening.

The storm in the evening came just as the performance had commenced, and there was some tall running done to get out of the way of the storm, which blew down the tent and tore it somewhat. The outfit left for Hays yesterday morning."

A detail of the blow-down appeared in a story in the Topeka *State Journal* of August 15 under the heading "Circus Life Without Spangles.

"Billy Gibbons was another circus man in hard luck. He was traveling with Barry's [partner of Sieber] circus, and when they were at Ellis a few weeks ago a playful cyclone wafted away their tent and

the center pole fell right across Billy's leg and he wasn't any earthly use to the circus after that, so he came to Topeka, where he heard there was a hospital. A friend in the city gave him his meals, but he slept in a box car at the North Topeka junction. Here he was pulled [arrested]. The court desiring to see his wound, the trouser's leg was pulled up and revealed a leg that certainly needed the care of a doctor. 'Well, I don't want to punish a sick man,' said Judge Reed, so Billy Gibbons was permitted to limp out of court."

The Ellis *Headlight* which missed out entirely on Sieber's advertising expressed the opinion that, "Sieber [sic] and Howe's circus was a thin affair."

Sieber ran no newspaper advertising for the July 21 exhibitions at Hays City, but in spite of that, "The circus took in \$231," according to the *Sentinel*.

The *Sentinel* had a few other things to say about Sieber and Company, such as, "Rotten! Rotten! Rotten! We are just now thinking of the circus.

"The so-called circus which exhibited in the city yesterday was a monumental, cyclonic fraud."

Sieber & Company was not a complete loss to the town of Hays for there were some citizens, according to the *Sentinel*, who reaped a small but unprecedented harvest.

"There was one poor lone relic of the sure-thing gamblers left in the city after the races and circus. He was a kid and so green in his business that he dropped what little money he had and could not leave the town with the other fellows. Indeed his game was a benefit to the town as the boys beat it. Last night the virtue of the county officials rose to the surface and they made the boy a victim to the stern majesty of the law. He was arrested and now lies in jail. We have no criticism to make for the arrest beyond the suggestion that it appears rather singular that so

many rank games were permitted to go on unchecked, while the fairest one of the lot is now pulled to make an example. For instance, a soldier from the fort played the thimble game in front of the circus tent all day. It is notoriously 'a dead sure thing.'"

"Wat Ziegler," the *Sentinel* reported, "has defiant information that part of the circus got lost on the road. He had been assured that 160 men and 80 horses would be in attendance, whereas but five men, two women, four mules and a sick boy constituted the party." Wat exaggerated in both directions.

The *Ellis County Free Press*, Hays City, also labeled the show "the greatest FRAUD. No animals, no horses, no thing but a few Acrobats and a minstrel show, with the customary side show. Such shows should be driven from the road."

In spite of the bad reports the show continued on the road and surfaced again in Coldwater for exhibitions on August 23. The *Coldwater Review*, August 19, carried the following hand-out: "Coming--keep your eye on the day and date--Howe's London Shows and Colossal Museum. Do not fail to see the grand free exhibition--Miss Franky Barry in her daring and thrilling ascension in mid air on a single wire stretched from the ground to the highest peak of the monster pavilion. Free to everybody. Two grand performances, afternoon and evening. At Coldwater, August 23rd. Greensburg, August 24th. General admission 50 cents."

Frances "Franky" Barry was the young daughter of J. M. Barry. Franky and her father worked together for many years until she died of a sudden illness in 1903.

Col. Spicer was again on the road in 1887 but the only date so far discovered was Muscotah, May 21. There was no advance newspaper publicity and following the exhibitions the *Record* disposed of the occasion in two short paragraphs.

"Spicer's Circus has come and gone, yet but a few were taken by the concern. People are not so fond of spending their hard earnings at one horse shows as they were in former times.

"There were but few more people on our streets on show day than are usually

here on Saturday. It shows that the people in the country are not so ready to spend money running to every humbug concern that comes along."

The year 1887 was a hard one in Kansas.

Reports of the Sells brothers' shows in their Kansas exhibitions prior to 1880--and also their No. 2 show, Anderson &



Barrett's big feature in 1887 was Jo-Jo, the dog faced boy. His correct name was Theodore Peteroff. Pfening Archives.

Company--contain many references to gambling.

In 1880, according to the *Topeka Daily Commonwealth*, July 7, the brothers were clearing "\$_000 per day." With their new wealth came a desire to present to the world a facade of unimpeachable respectability, and reports of gambling on their aggregations declined sharply.

The season of 1887 brought a return of the gambler and the nimble fingered, fast-talking money changer traveling with, or following S. H. Barrett's New United Monster Shows. No sharper can operate on the circus lot day after day without the consent and protection of the circus management. Of the thirty-four dates played in Kansas in 1887, gambling and short changing was reported in thirteen towns.

Barrett was generally on the advance and the actual running of the show was in the hands of Lewis Sells. Barrett was married to a sister of the Sells brothers. Possibly the brothers believed that since the Barrett name was in use, the honorable Sells escutcheon would not be sullied by the demeaning activities of the sleezy schemers. With one exception, the names of Ephraim, Lewis or Peter were nowhere linked in the Kansas press to the Barrett organization.

Barrett and his squad of sixteen arrived in Topeka May 13 on the show's advance car and checked into the Windsor Hotel owned by Allen Sells, retired circus man, now a "capitalist" residing in Topeka. While the bill posters were covering the city Barrett called on all of the Topeka newspapers.

The Topeka press campaign began May 14 with an advertisement in the *Kansas Democrat*. The same ad, featuring a likeness of Jo-Jo, "The Human Skye Terrier," appeared in every Topeka paper. The ad pointed out that Jo-Jo was "not an insipid idiot, but a bright, alert, vivacious being."

The claim that Barrett was "Most positively the only Tented Show that will visit Topeka this season" was incorrect for in the future for Topeka were Doris & Colvin, followed by Forepaugh. If Barrett was intending to stampede the public into attendance at his exhibition he was hugely successful.

The Topeka papers carried a total of thirteen handouts all of which appeared over and over throughout the Kansas sojourn.

The menagerie was an important attraction that permitted the attendance of the clergy without them supporting the circus performance which might not be strictly "moral" in their view. The menagerie provided an excuse for many who would not otherwise spend their fifty cents.

"Rare Zoological Attractions.

"One of the chief features of S. H. Barrett's menagerie is a huge double-horned rhinoceros--the unicorn of Holy Writ, and the sole specimen, it is said, on the continent. This singular beast has many points of attraction, a notable one being his wonderfully thick hide, which is invulnerable to the ordinary rifle bullet. Barrett has a standing offer of \$20,000 from the Philadelphia Zoological Society for the animal. The menagerie department of the Barrett show is exceptionally complete and attractive throughout. It was extensively replenished last winter by European and Oriental importations.

"Rev. T. DeWitt Talmage makes the following complimentary remarks about this

zoological collection: "I passed two very pleasant and profitable hours in examining Mr. Barrett's remarkable collection of wild animals. The huge black rhinoceros possesses peculiar interest."

Talmage was a widely syndicated preacher whose sermons filled column after column of small town newspapers. A hundred years later he would have had a television ministry.

Reaping the most space were handouts concerning Jo-Jo, such as the following:

"His Face Like a Skye's.

"Of all the remarkable human beings who have been unearthed in late years, 'Jo-Jo' the dog faced Russian boy, who will be presented here with S. H. Barrett's tented show, May 30, can justly lay claim to the championship honors. His resemblance to a skye terrier is so naturalistic that when one of the real species looks upon him the canine becomes instantly palsied with fear. The New York Sun in describing 'Jo-Jo' on his arrival in Gotham says

"Jo-Jo's face resembles a scotch terrier's; silky, light-brown hair covers his head concealing his forehead, extending to the eyebrows, which are long and shaggy, and overhang his eyes like a skye's. hair covers his nose, growing thickly from cartilages and parted aside like a heavy moustache growing from the bridge of the nose.

"Beginning on the under eyelids, hair, massed, grows downward on the cheeks and forms a shaggy mane on either side.

"His chin is covered by a heavy silk beard. Only the eyes and mouth can be distinctly made out. The expression of the eyes is peculiar, and the more they are studied the more they seem to resemble those of an intelligent dog.

"He speaks Russian, French and German, and has picked up some English.

"Frequently his voice resembles that of a dog's growl or bark. Usually he is as full of play as a puppy, and when he can not make himself understood by words he resorts to pantomime. He is a ward of the Russian Government and is in the charge of Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Forster.

"Jo-Jo will be immediately placed with the traveling exhibition of the famous showman, S. H. Barrett. The latter, while in Russia last summer, consummated arrangements with the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs for the engagement of the boy for a period of one year. It is understood that Barrett pays \$1,000 a week for Jo-Jo, and has given a heavy bond for the prodigy's safe return at the expiration of the contract.

"Jo-Jo forms one of the attractions of Barrett's show proper, and no additional charge is made to see him."

Other personalities covered in hand-

outs were George Zorella and Emma Du-bois, trapeze artists; the Ziegler brothers, acrobats; the Martell family, riding bicycles on the high wire; the three Bryant sisters, "the only lady acrobats in the world;" Master Albert, the "human fly;" the Caron brothers, scientific athletes; Zolo, fired from a cannon; the Rice brothers, acrobats and Madam Duvall, iron jaw.

A bareback rider, Viola Rivers, "an airy, fairy thing of grace and beauty," received nearly as much promotion as did Jo-Jo.

"The young lady is accounted the most daring, skillful and graceful rider that has ever appeared in this country.

Though young in years, not having yet attained her majority, Miss Rivers has already gained for herself the reputation of being the foremost equestrienne in all Europe.

"One of her most pronounced admirers is the Empress of Austria--herself a noted rider--who has given the fair American numerous substantial evidences of her approbation in the shape of medals and jewels. The young lady has probably been presented with

more diamonds and jewelry than any other contemporary artiste, not even excepting the famous Patti. Miss Rivers' collection of valuables represents such an enormous sum of money that for safety, and to avoid the care of them herself, she carries a lynx-eyed detective with her, he acting as custodian of the precious articles."

The story stated that her "trophyies" would be exhibited in the window of one of "our prominent jewelry houses," but nowhere in Kansas was such an exhibition reported.

Barrett was lucky to secure Miss Rivers, after five years in Europe, for "\$375 per week and traveling expenses for herself, mother, maid and detective--the highest salary ever paid a rider in this country. The young lady's mother is her constant companion and frowns down all advances made by heart-smitten dudes."

Miss Rivers--dare I call her Viola?--"rides bareback entirely, executing back and forward somersaults, pirouettes and fancy dances while her horse is running at full speed." She "rivals both Fish and Robinson in artistic evolutions."

Viola Rivers appeared with Sells Brothers in 1877, Barrett in 1885 and Barnum & London in 1886.

Another handout used in nearly every town was titled "Giant and Clown Elephants." Without disclosing the total number of elephants on the show the story described Bismark and Juno as the central figures of Barrett's "herd of huge elephants."

"Now that Jumbo is no more, S. H. Barrett's gigantic pachyderm, 'Bismark,' is entitled to the championship belt for prodigious

immensity. 'Bismark's' amiable spouse, 'Juno,' does not have to take much sass from her liege lord, she being nearly as tall and fully as heavy, as his elephantineship with Teutonic title.

"Two other elephants with this show are 'Doc' and 'Ben Butler,' a brace of merry clowns. They exhibit almost human intelligence in their unique and laughable performances. They conclude their act with a genuine boxing bout, four rounds, Marquis of Queensberry rules."

Pugilistic contests were banned everywhere in Kansas, but were frequently held clandestinely. The handout continued, "This contest will surely take place here unless the strong arm of the law interposes.

The advance agent states that he has no fear of magisterial interference."

Other attractions offered by Barrett were forty Kentucky and English thoroughbreds; Donald McKenzie's troupe of Scotch acrobats waging a broadsword combat on horseback; Japanese jugglers, rope walkers and wrestlers and Nubar Hassan's Soudanese Arabs.

One of the greatest challenges to wandering showmen was how to avoid the license fee. No matter how small the charge might be, it was paid only under duress and it was a feather in the agent's cap to get a reduction in the rate, and an even greater honor to avoid payment entirely.

On May 17 the *Democrat* reported "An Outrage." Allen Sells, who had retired to Topeka and had become a much respected "capitalist" petitioned the city council to waive the payment of a license fee for the Barrett show. The council debated the matter and refused the request by one vote, that of Mayor Metsker. The indignation of the editor is worthy of note.



Viola Rivers was the featured rider with the S. H. Barrett Show Archives.

"All the old residents of Topeka remember the general rejoicing in 1880 when Sells Brothers purchased the Windsor Hotel and began making extensive investments in Topeka real estate which have since run up into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Even more valuable if possible, to this city at that time was the moral effect of these investments than the money itself. It imparted a confidence to Topeka it had never before enjoyed. It was known that the Sells Brothers were cool, sagacious business men. They had been all over the country and has visited every city of any size in the United States. The fact of their making such heavy investments was at once accepted as the undisputable evidence they had faith in Topeka; that they believed it was a good town, and had a good future before it.

"It can truthfully be said that these investments in real estate by the Sells Brothers, amounting to at least 300,000, were the beginning of the greatest boom for Topeka which, in point of fact, has known no cessation from that day. More than any other family, probably more than any score of families, the Sells Brothers have aided in imparting confidence and in upbuilding Topeka.

"In view of these facts, this action of the city council, which was dictated by Mayor Metsker, is to be regretted. It is an illustration of petty malice or stupidity such as was never witnessed in this city. The men whom Topeka should delight to honor; who have toiled and are traveling year after year over the country to earn money to invest in this city, have been needlessly insulted. We ask that every paper, daily and weekly, in this city be swift to protest this indignity."

The comments concerning the Sells brothers were the absolute truth, but also an understatement of their influence on the city of Topeka. An investment of 300,000 of circus profits grew to nearly a million dollars of real estate. The main street of the city, Kansas Avenue, was paved in 1887 because of the efforts and insistence of Allen Sells. Hotels, business buildings and residences were built by Sells money or financed by Sells loans. An eight block stretch of Topeka's prime commercial district held twenty-five lots owned by the Sells brothers.

Topeka has forgotten the contributions of the Sells brothers. There is neither a street nor a park named Sells. The only monument is a cenotaph on the Allen and Sarah Sells plot in Topeka Cemetery, which also holds the remains of Willie Sells.

On show day, May 30, license No. 588 was issued by the City Clerk of Topeka, to Barrett's Circus for one day. Circus, \$150. Side show, \$10.



Sheldon H. Barrett, brother-in-law of the Sells brothers, and proprietor of S. H. Barrett's New United Monster Railroad Shows. Pfening Archives.

Thousands of people witnessed the parade on Kansas Avenue, but none of the papers presented any details. The Barrett press department wrote the word-for-word identical reviews that appeared in the *Democrat* and the *Capital*. The press agent claimed 10,000 patrons at the evening show. The *Daily Commonwealth* estimated the matinee at 7,000 persons, "and fully as many as that number in the evening, every seat being occupied and many persons standing. The performance was fully up to the highest standard of such performances, and if one may judge from the frequent applause, the vast audience were highly pleased. The horses were in excellent condition, the riding, vaulting, acrobatic, gymnastic and other difficult and daring feats first class, and all the appliances for the diverse entertainment perfect.

"Above all the show was a clean one, and the most fastidious, (and there were many such there) could not take exception to word or performance.

"The Russian dog-faced boy was a freak of nature that elicited much attention and excited great wonder on the part of the spectators."

"The circus tent last evening," according to the *Journal*, was literally packed long before the performance commenced, and extra seats had to be arranged on the ground."

The *Journal's* estimate of the show's quality differed sharply from that of the *Democrat*.

"The ring entertainment," according to the *Journal*, "was not a great improvement on the ten cent circuses that have visited Topeka of late. The most interesting fea-

ture occurred during the dog show, when a strange cur entered the ring. The dogs, without an exception, immediately left their chairs and started for the frightened dog, which dashed into the audience, followed by the pack of trained canines, where a bloody fight took place. The people scrambled over one another to get out of their way and it was with much difficulty that the trainer and his gang of red coated assistants, succeeded in getting the dogs back to their places. The clown did not attempt to sing, much to the delight of the audience. No one will attempt to deny that Jo-Jo looks like a dog. His hair is as fine as silk."

The *Capital* commented that, "Yesterday was exceedingly quiet considering the crowds of strangers that were in the city. The circus did not bring along with it the crowd of roughs and sharpers that generally accompany a show. There were no cases of robbery reported to the police, which in itself is something extraordinary."

Allen Sells spent the day assisting at the front door.

The entire Kansas tour, all confirmed exhibitions, is listed below, together with the population according to Kansas census of 1885:

May 30, Topeka, 23,499; May 31, Lawrence, 10,625; June 1, Ottawa, 6,626; June 2, Chanute, 1,911; June 3, Independence, 4,115; June 4, Winfield, 4,183; June 6, Medicine Lodge, under 1,000; June 7, Harper, 2,769; June 8, Kiowa, under 1,000; June 9, Wellington, 6,346; June 10, Caldwell, 1,970; June 11, Arkansas City, 3,328; June 13, Kingman, under 1,000; June 14, Wichita, 16,023; June 15, Hutchinson, 4,251; June 16, Great Bend, 1,499; June 17, Lyons, 1,104; June 18, McPherson, 2,530; June 20, Peabody, 1,588; June 21, Strong City, under 1,000; June 22, Emporia, 7,759; June 23, Osage City, 3,633; June 24, under 1,000; June 25, Manhattan, 2,735; June 27, Lincoln, under 1,000; June Minneapolis, 1,779; June 29, Beloit, 2,003; June 30, Abilene, 3,516; July 1, Clay Center, 3,830; July 2, Concordia, 3,002; October 10, Ellsworth, 1,584; October 11, Council Grove, 1,742; October 12, Quenemo, under 1,000 and October 13, Yates Center, 1,271.

Medicine Lodge with a population of less than 1,000 reported 3,000 people in attendance to Barrett's show, three times as many people as resided in the village. At Hutchinson twice as many people were estimated to have gone to the circus as lived in the city. At Peabody the attendance was estimated at 8,000, roughly five times the number of citizens the town claimed.

The audience came from every corner of the county and from counties nearby, sometimes coming a hundred miles or

more on the low priced excursion trains. The impact on a town such as Peabody must have been awesome. How could a town of 1,600 accommodate the needs of 6,500 strangers? Toilets. Water. Food. Medical services. Security. Safety. Weather. Shade, food and water for the horses. And frequently the pestilence of pick-pockets, drunks, gamblers, thieves, whores and fakirs.

But, also, think of what fun it must have been. Renewing friendships. Shopping the stores. Eating restaurant food. Boys and girls flirting. And all the incredible and utterly useless feats performed in the magic ring. Not even the Fourth of July could compete with Circus Day.

Local merchants frequently took advantage of the coming of the circus to link their businesses to the glamor of the show. In Ottawa the following appeared in the *Journal and Triumph*: "Circus people are shrewd in business matters, hence Barrett & Co., have contracted to buy their groceries of J. W. Black the day they exhibit in Ottawa." The circus was the most elegant, rich and awe-inspiring event any Kansas town could hope for, and such an endorsement could not fail to impress the citizenry, or so it seemed to Mr. Black, and he was probably correct.

The *Journal and Triumph*, reporting the exhibitions at Ottawa on June 1 carried the first report of sharp practices in Kansas when it reported that, "Barrett's circus showed here yesterday, and was not what the people had been led to expect. His ticket agent attempted to charge 30 cents for half-fare or 25 cent tickets."

A new handout appeared in the *Chanute Blade* heralding the exhibitions of June 2. The story was about a formidable Bengal tiger now with Barrett. The tiger was "A Terror to Animal Trainers" and a challenge to the press department, especially to those who loved to tiddle.

"The natives in Bengal state that he had destroyed and devoured fifty or more people, including two entire families who resided near his native jungle."

The press agent failed to give names.

"He [the tiger] seemed to bear a charmed life, and could not be exterminated with either spear or bullet. He was finally caught in a huge trap, bound with ropes and thongs and forced into a strong cage in which he was conveyed on the ship to America."

"On board ship he was still a threat for he broke out of his strong cage and terrorized the passengers who locked themselves in their staterooms while the crew

took to the rigging. All might have perished had it not been for one cool-headed mate who seized a fire hose and forced the monster back into his cage.

"Since being placed in Mr. Barrett's menagerie, where he is confined alone in a specially strong cage, he has torn the arms and shoulders of two employees through the steel bars of his lair, and no man can be found among the several experienced and courageous wild-beast



This drawing of Jo-Jo, the dog faced boy appeared in the 1887 Barrett courier. Pfening Archives.

trainers with the show daring enough to enter his den and face him. They believe he can never be subdued."

The *National Enquirer* could not have told it better.

The art of the press agent is a long neglected facet of circus history, but the crowds would not have assembled without the beat of his drum. Lithographs sold tickets and the parade sold tickets. In between the first efforts of the bill poster and the triumph of the procession it was the press agent who kept the flames alive

and fanned them to a greater heat. On show day the press agent would call on the local newsmen and regal them with anecdotes, hand out tickets, take them to lunch, buy them a drink and now and then "lend" someone a dollar or two, all in hope that come next season the editor would be even more cooperative. It was frequently the press agent who paid the advertising bill, and this above all else endeared him to the newsmen.

The effect of a circus on the economy of a small Kansas town is illustrated by the following report in the *Chanute Blade*: "Barrett's circus attracted a very large concourse of people from the surrounding country to this city on Thursday last, and our merchants reaped an extra big harvest in consequence. Carter & Son had force of fifteen clerks waiting on customers and were rushed at that, and a similar condition of affairs prevailed with all the merchants. It is estimated that fully eight thousand people watched the procession as it paraded through our streets. A large number of people went home after the parade, not waiting for the show. Four thousand attended the circus in the afternoon and 2,500 in the evening, and we heard of no grumbling, everybody seemed to think they'd got the worth of their money. To see Jo-Jo is alone worth the price of admission."

A handout in the *Star and Kansan*, Independence, named the equestrians who would appear on June 3.

"The list of male riders includes James Leon, the recognized champion; Clarence Robinson, the greatest living hurdle rider; Mons. Eugene Jerome, the renowned equestrian juggler; Bob Whitaker, the unmatched character and trick rider and Messrs. Geo. Showers, Billy Davenport, Charley Lawrence and John McGaw."

The equestrienne corps was led by the "dashing and bewitching" Viola Rivers.

Some of the other equestrienne starts "are M'lle Renz, a German importation and the most fearless somersault thrower of her sex; Miss Pauline Dumont, the brilliant and statuesque manege equestrienne; Madam Rockwell, the world-eminent six-horse rider, and Misses Daisy

Ramsdell, Mollie Stokes, Josie Richards and Susie Wilson."

In conclusion the handout boasted "This is a remarkable gathering, truly. All of the riders, both male and female, ride bareback horses; pad acts are conspicuous by their absence. Lovers of artistic horsemanship have a rich treat in store."

The *Star and Kansan*, May 20, carried a short piece on Jo-Jo which was used frequently for later dates.

"Jo-Jo is said to be morally opposed to the weed, but delights in chewing gum, and fairly adores gum-drops. These virtues ought surely to enhance his attractiveness with the fair sex. A peculiarity about 'Jo-Jo' that will commend him to the average American citizen is that he has no use for the genus dude. 'Jo-Jo' gives amusing imitations of dudes, prima donnas, prize-fighters and policemen."

Gambling, short changing and other invidious enterprises received much attention from local press when Barrett exhibited in Medicine Lodge, June 6.

The managers, according to the *Chief*, were "very gentlemanly and liberal," but having paid his tribute, the *Chief* continued, "We would suggest but one improvement to the management, and that is to get rid of a few sharpers who try to swindle the patrons; they succeeded in doing but little here, but were caught in a number of thieving tricks; they seemed to be in the employ of the show and they hurt its reputation."

The *Barber County Index*, Medicine Lodge, recounted a tale of one victim who refused to stay swindled.

"Uncle George Martin, of Valley township, was picked up for a 'gray' by one of the circus crowd. In buying his tickets he exhibited a roll of bills. The ticket vender immediately wanted to exchange small bills for large ones, and Mr. Martin, being accommodating consented. The fake started to give him \$30 in small bills, but he suggested that he would recount them. With a quick movement the fellow changed the bills and handed the lot to Mr. Martin, who, a few moments afterward, discovered that he had \$7 instead of \$30. He came up town, looked up the law, and saw the offense could be prosecutor, and then he went for that ticket seller, who seeing that his in-

tended victim had pluck, was too glad to give the old gentleman his money back. Mr. Barrett or Mr. Sells or whoever owns the show should not have such characters around it."

The show arrived in Medicine Lodge on June 5 and forty of the aggregation claimed their reservations at the Grand Hotel.

The *Index* reported "a game of baseball was played here last Sunday between a nine from Barrett's circus, including four professional acrobats. It was an action-packed game and the circus people lost, 30 to 20, but the real loser was the umpire, T. C. Malloy, who "was disabled by a hot ball which lifted his right cheek bone out of line about an inch. G. W. Vickers finished the job. The game was witnessed by a large audience."

"Every hotel and eating house in the city was crowded Monday," according to the *Index*. "The Grand Hotel fed one hundred and fifty persons at dinner."

A paragraph in the *Index* reported the sale of Ed Buck's cougar to the Barrett show for \$25. This was the animal that

There was not an inferior animal of the horse kind in the entire outfit."

In another column the *Chief* reported that, "It is estimated that 3,000 people took in the show here Monday, and that the concern took at least \$2,500 out of town. Another pull at Kiowa on Wednesday swelled the amount to probably \$5,000 taken out of the county."

"What a glorious rain," is the remark of everyone to-day as they speak of the heavy torrents of the early morning," the *Harper Daily Sentinel* reported on show day, June 7. "The rain set in about 4 o'clock this morning and fell continuously until 9 o'clock, when it cleared up and the sun shower brightly, drying the streets and leaving the air cool and pleasant for the immense crowds that filled the streets."

W. F. Aymar, press agent, called on the *Sentinel* show day and was found to be "an agreeable gentleman and a pleasant talker."

The *Sentinel* was an afternoon daily, but this did not prevent it from stating on show day that, "The performance this af-

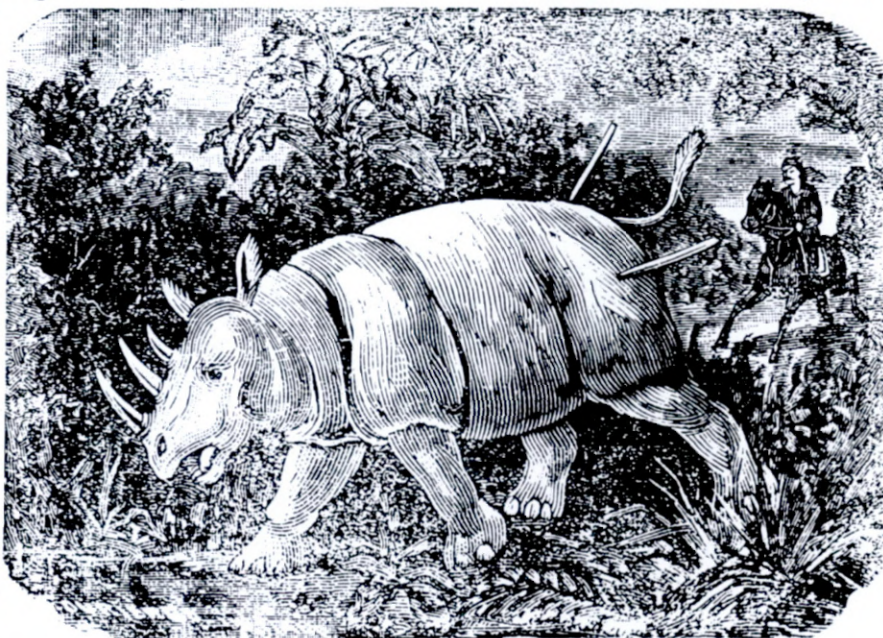
ternoon was grand, novel and new." Without a doubt Aymar told them that the show was grand, novel and new.

One story the press agent did not write for the *Sentinel* was the following: "All morning the cracked voice of the street fakir has been floating into the sanctum window telling the people how to bet on his game and win. He rolls up ten, twenty and fifty dollar bills in small paper packages and sells them for \$1.00; when you buy one however you are out just the price of the package."

After the circus had come and gone, June 8, at Kiowa, the editor wrote a "poor me" editorial which appeared in the *Herald*, June 16.

"Chestnuts.

"It is enough to make a man blush with shame to think there are so many suckers living on dry land. The *HERALD* thought that there was not a man, woman or child in Barber County so verdant as to bet on the shell game that was in progress on the circus grounds on the 8th instant, yet we are informed that the gentleman who manipulated the innocent looking little instruments of robbery on that occasion took away one thousand dollars of good



The "triple horned rhinoceros" was illustrated in the Barrett newspaper ad used in Medicine Lodge for the May 26 date. Kansas State Historical Society.

was "a lion loose in the streets" on the James T. Johnson Great Western Circus the previous year.

The Medicine Lodge *Crescent* had little to say about the Barrett show, but an ad on May 26 was illustrated by an engraving of a triple-horned rhinoceros.

The *Chief* reported that, "We have never seen a better lot of horses with any show and it would be hard to find their superiors in the best collections of the country."

Barber County hard cash. We take occasion to inform our readers at this time that the shell game is the greatest swindle on earth and that he who bucks against it will surely drop his little wad. It is pre-eminently a slight of hand performance, and the covered little round ball is up the fellow's sleeve while the spectator is dead certain it is under a certain shell. We had the extreme mortification of seeing people squander various sums of from ten to twenty dollars in this densely purchased experience on circus day, that wouldn't take the HERALD if they got it for fifty cents a year, thereby voluntarily enriching a common robber while they permit the poor editor who is toiling from week to week for their benefit to live in want, misery and suffering."

The only mention of show day, June 9, to appear in the *Sumner County Standard* of June 10 reported on gambling on the streets of Wellington.

Marshall Magee brought two shell game operators into court to meet the police judge. One operator was fined one dollar and costs, "in all amounting \$8.50. The other, on account of a little stubbornness, danced to the tune of \$12 or \$15."

Another swindle reported by the *Standard* was one that directs attention to human greed, a game this author has never played nor will every play, but which he finds hugely amusing.

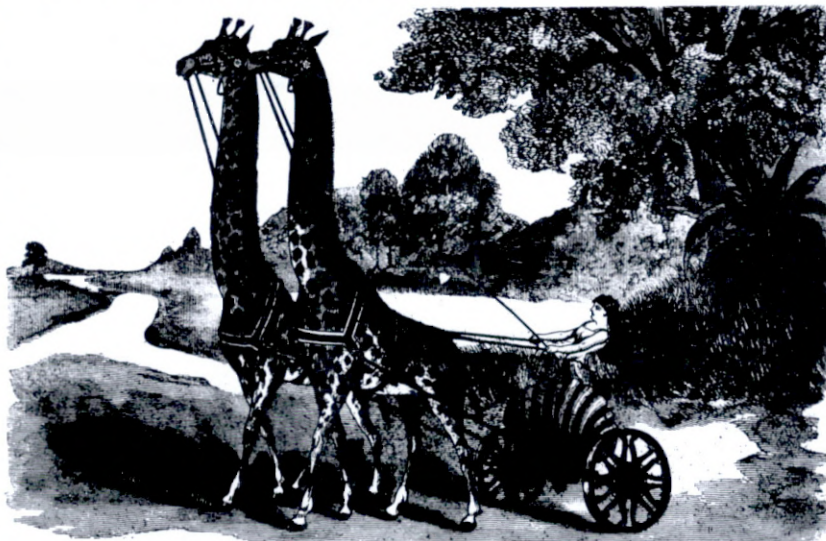
"A successful little 'skin game' was working in the city Thursday, by a gentleman with a glib tongue and pleasant manner. He began by giving away nickles and buying them back for a dime, etc., and finally got as high as a dollar. Then he informed his fortune favored patrons that he was going to show them a little watch game, and further stated that he would skin them alive. The watches were securely done up in packages and he told those who bought them not to open the packages until he told them to. After disposing of twelve or fifteen watches at \$2.00 each he did the great vanishing act and has not been seen since. The packages contained each, an old brass watch case minus the works. Some of our citizens, we understand, are numbered among the losers. Their impression was that he would buy the packages back from them as he had done the nickles and dimes."

The exhibitions at Hutchinson, June 15, received much attention from the *Weekly Democrat*.

"Circus Day.

"Barrett's Came and Went Barring a
"Less Plethoric Packetbook the Average
"Citizens Remains the Same.

"Yesterday was show day and the streets, in consequence, were one solid mass of struggling humanity from early



A "pair of majestic giraffes, broken to harness," were illustrated in the 1887 Barrett courier. Pfening Archives.

morn to the dewy eve. and in fact far into the night.

"The special train bearing the show arrived at about 5 o'clock yesterday morning and the moment it pulled into the depot it was surrounded by a more that usually noisy crowd of small boys, who had seemingly lain in wait since the night before.

"The unloading of animals was finished by nine o'clock and the tent put up and at 10:30 the street parade pulled into Main Street from the show grounds.

"The street parade was a stupendous affair, comprising something near a mile of conglomerate bands, beauties, caricatures and carriages. The calliope and the animals were the features of the street parade.

"The afternoon performance was given to crowded canvas. The seats were all occupied, while the space intervening [sic] between the seats and the ring was crowded with persons seated upon the grass, unable to procure seats. The crowd in the afternoon was variously estimated from 3,000 to 5,000 people.

"The ring performance was far above the average. The riders, jumpers, athletes, trapeze performers and hurdle racers were all good. The bicycle experts presented a more than usually interesting program.

"In the evening the canvass held about the same crowd as in the afternoon and

the comments for the day performance will amply cover the night.

"Jo-Jo, he of the dog face, came nearer filling the bill than any one expected. The lithographs presented the public of him are very good representations of his canine-human face.

"The fakir was out in his full glory and the rural rooster, in consequence, puts in the hours between dark and bed time kicking himself behind the barn for having attempted to catch the circus sucker and down some slick fingered gent at his own game.

"The circus gave almost universal satisfaction, which comment only proves that the S. H. Barrett combination has lost none of its old time power to please the people."

The *Caldwell News* had little to say about

the performances given on June 10, but what it did say was important. "Barrett's circus was hauled to this place in twenty-two cars."

The only identification of a Sells family member was a report in the *Hutchinson News* concerning the exhibitions of June 15, which stated that "Mrs. E. Sells, wife of the manager of the Barrett's circus bought a \$25 bill of fancy goods at Raff Bros., while here, to say nothing of staple dry goods."

"W. Fred Aymar, press representative for Barrett's show called Wednesday," according to the *News*. "Mr. Aymar is an old newspaper man, an A-1 gentleman and a clown of national reputation. We hope to meet him again soon."

It is difficult for us living a hundred years later to imagine the excitement created by a circus in 1887. Every town in Kansas had an opera house filled in the winter by roving bands of players, but generally vacant in the blistering Kansas summer. There were in the summer tented repertory actors, minstrel shows, Indian medicine shows, and the perennial Uncle Tom's Cabin, and soul-saving revivals, but none came close to the thrill of a circus. The circus came as a mystery, out of nowhere, bringing a cargo of glitter, sparkle and riches existing nowhere else in all the world, least of all in rural Kansas.

The circus brought glamorous people doing absolutely useless things at great risk to their lives, and beautiful girls showing their limbs as they danced on

the back of a cantering horse with one leg pointing to Heaven and the other straight to Hell. And there were animals that were never seen in any Kansas town or on a farm. Rhinoceros, hippopotamus, giraffe, great apes, lions, tigers and elephants. Especially elephants. So when a circus came to town the people responded greatly.

S. H. Barrett's New United Monster Shows was not the greatest on the road, but it was large and it was good and its reputation was comparatively excellent.

At Great Bend for exhibitions of June 16, the *Tribune* reported, "There were more people to the square inch in Great Bend Thursday than ever seen in town."

On another page the *Tribune* said, "Those who attended the show say it was a very ordinary affair. Still, a show draws more people than anything else. People never cease to be children, and many just go to be mingling with the crowd."

The Barrett press corps used a handout at McPherson which they claimed was Mark Twain's endorsement of their magnificent enterprise: "I certainly enjoy Barrett's show more than any similar entertainment I ever attended. I never saw the equal for brilliant and exceptional features. The riding, acrobatic feats and aerial acts are fascinating in the extreme, the clowns, strange as it may seem, are actually funny, the menagerie is unusually complete and attractive, Jo-Jo is the most remarkable human phenomenon of the age, and all in all, if you want a good afternoon's entertainment, I would advise you to take in Barrett's circus should it happen around your way."

The McPherson *Freeman* had numerous short comments concerning circus day, June 18.

"The merchants had a big trade Saturday.

"The hack man did a big business circus day.

"The street car lines did a good business Saturday.

"A number of the 'boys' were considerable under the 'influence' Saturday.

"Several parties were 'taken in' on the shell game Saturday to the tune of about thirty dollars.

"Barrett's show Saturday in this city was quite largely attended. We failed to notice any new features, all about the same old line.

"The ice cream stand at the corner of main and Marlin Streets, did a fair business Saturday. The proceeds were for the benefit of the Catholic church."

Barrett billed Peabody for exhibitions on June 20. The coming of a big show was a point of pride in a state where young cities were fierce competitors and the rivalry between Newton and Peabody was as fierce as any. With a holier-than-thou

tilt of the nose the Peabody *Gazette* snidely remarked that, "The Newton *Kansan* is so jealous of Peabody that it refers to Barrett's circus as a dog show."

On show day the *Gazette* was an enthusiastic observer bubbling over with bits and pieces of show news, but first it was necessary to warn the citizenry.

"Before going to the circus to-night be sure to fasten your windows and lock your doors as a protection against burglars and robbers.



W. Fred Aymar served double duty as a clown and press agent on the Barrett show in 1887. Al Conover collection.

"Beware of fakirs and pickpockets, as a few of these are apt to intrude upon unsuspecting persons when large crowds, like the one in Peabody to-day, are collected together."

It must have been a comfort to its readers when the *Gazette* reported the following: "It speaks well for the management of S. H. Barrett's mammoth aggregation that they have in their employ a secret detective force for protecting their patrons and spectators against robbery by thieves and fakirs."

Despite all warnings and the efficiency of Barrett's police force, the *Gazette* had some bad news to report.

"Fred Gang's house was broken into during the parade, and a suit of clothes stolen.

"F. W. Gepe's house was broken into, and valuables taken.

"A 'malt' establishment was in full

blast, doing a rushing business, near the circus grounds.

"Five drunks recorded by the city marshal, of which four were Rock Island road track-layers.

"One was from Brainerd, and was allowed to go home, later in the day, on account of the lady who accompanied him here.

"One was let off and afterwards found in a worse state. It cost him a second arrest and fine.

"One was very vicious and unruly and pays \$10 and costs--in money or labor.

"A gold watch was stolen from a man while he was asleep from the effects of stimulants."

No one ever died of thirst in prohibition Kansas.

"Several gambling devices found the usual number of willing victims, and many who are 'too poor to take a paper' spent months of their earnings in 'bucking the tiger' at the tiger's own game."

It was all so unnecessary, for the *Gazette* had warned the public.

There was a plus side to circus day; it was not all booze and thievery.

"Peabody's population is greatly inflated to-day by large delegations from Florence, Marion, Newton and other small towns in the neighborhood giving our city quite an unusually metropolitan appearance.

"W. Fred Aymar, the gentlemanly press agent of the S. H. Barrett monster shows, made us a pleasant call this morning. It is a pleasure to transact business with such men as those who are connected with this fine company. The whole troupe are well spoken of where they have been."

After the show had come and gone the *Gazette* still had circus news to report.

"Nearly every paper in the county was represented at the circus yesterday, as well as most of the county officers.

"The money order business at the post office reached \$500 before 9 o'clock A. M. yesterday. It is the custom of traveling actors to send their money home for safe-keeping as fast as they make it, so that they have nothing to lose when an emergency arises.

"Barrett's circus with all its excitement, glory and pomp, captures the popular mind on Monday," began a review in the *Gazette*.

"At nine o'clock in the morning, an innumerable multitude filled the street and lined the walks on the principal thor-

ofares [sic]. The surging mass of humanity which does homage to the circus possesses more enthusiasm than the average fourth of July creates, and the grandeur of the 'gilded chariots' filled with animals has more mystery than the hieroglyphics of the pyramids.

"Barrett's circus is a show which gives universal satisfaction everywhere it exhibits, and fulfilled all expectations here. The menagerie is a large one and everything advertised from the hippopotamus to Jo-Jo was on the boards. The circus was first class."

The review decried the sale of alcoholic beverages and complained that, "Another vile nuisance was the many gamblers plying their nefarious tricks.

"The number in the main tent is estimated at five thousand in the afternoon, and three three in the evening. Hundreds of visitors from everywhere spent the day here, and gave themselves up to enjoying a holiday."

The crowd that attended the show was more than five times the population of Peabody.

Kansas People, a newspaper of Osage City, remembered mainly the gamblers that came to town with the Barrett show, June 23.

"Jo-Jo has come and gone. The big show with all its bustle and excitement left quietly in the night. After only a few short days its presence here seems almost a dream, and will soon be almost entirely forgotten. But there are some people, who attended the show, that learned an important lesson that will not soon be forgotten, we refer to those who fooled away their hard earned money at the gambling stands."

The exhibitions of June 29 did not arouse much comment in the *Beloit Courier* after the show had gone.

Fred Aymar was respectfully acknowledged, but the most informative comment in the *Courier* was, "We heard a young lady declare 'she saw an Algebra at the circus.'"

The same issue of the *Courier*, June 30, carried a story entitled "The Coming of the Greatest Show on Earth," announcing the coming of the Doris & Colvin aggregation, August 31.

The last summer date in Kansas was Concordia, July 2.

On a Sunday run from Denver over the Union Pacific the show jumped 416 miles for exhibitions at Ellsworth, October 10. The only impressions made on the Ellsworth *Reporter* were two short paragraphs.

"We were pleased to make the ac-

quaintance of Mr. Fred Aymar, press representative of Barrett's show, last Monday. He is a perfect gentlemen and extended courtesies to us that were highly appreciated."

"Barrett's show is an extra good one in every particular, and the street parade the best ever made in Ellsworth."

Ellsworth was frequently the jumping-off place for shows bound for Denver and the *Reporter* was qualified to compare Barrett with Anderson & Company, Sells Brothers and John Robinson, to say nothing of James T. Johnson's Great Western.

"We were pleased to make the acquaintance of Mr. Fred Aymar, press representative of Barrett's show, last Monday. He is a perfect gentlemen and extended courtesies to us that were highly appreciated."

"Several of our citizens who attended the show in this city last Monday, 'bet on another man's game,' and while they have less money than before coming to the show, they are loaded to the muzzle with experience."

Ellsworth Review, October 10, 1887

"Barrett's show is an extra good one in every particular, and the street parade the best ever made in Ellsworth."

Ellsworth was frequently the jumping-off place for shows bound for Denver and the *Reporter* was qualified to compare Barrett with Anderson & Company, Sells Brothers and John Robinson, to say nothing of James T. Johnson's Great Western Circus.

Gambling was still an unadvertised feature of the Barrett show and rated a notice in the *Ellsworth Review*.

"Several of our citizens who attended the show in this city last Monday, 'bet on another man's game,' and while they have less money than they had before coming to the show, they are loaded to the muzzle with experience. Ten to one they will bet on the same game, the next chance they have. They are generally that class of citizens who never read the papers 'because they are too expensive.'"

Had they subscribed to the *Review* they would have received the warning and their money would have remained in their pockets, of course.

The Council Grove *Republican* apparently saw nothing except gambling when the Barrett company played the town on October 11.

The editor had scant sympathy for the

victims and described them as "Belonging to the 'Smart Alec' class, who imagines themselves a little more clever and smart than the robbers who were there to do them up. When will the fool killer finish his Herculean task?"

On page eight the *Republican* made its final statement regarding circus day.

"The show came, saw and gobbled a thousand dollars, more or less, and yet some fellows were not happy. One 'bright and bloomin' hass' [sic] presented one of the fakers [sic] with \$175. That is he laid that much down and the faker took it up."

Barrett's advance car arrived in Quenemo on September 26 and proceeded to paper the town heralding performances on October 12. One of the bill posters got grossly drunk and found himself arrested for drunkenness, disorderly conduct and assault upon Dr. Kester, and was convicted.

According to the *Kansas Workman*, "Monday night one David Carrol bill poster for the Barrett show got drunk and raised some disturbance at the Santa Rita, making himself very obnoxious to the guests of the hotel. He attempted to force entrance to Dr. Kester's room and after being warned several times to leave, the Dr. shot him, the ball taking effect in one of his

arms. The next day the Dr. had his examination before squire Dawson and the facts showed that he was justified in shooting. He was discharged."

It is surprising that a show the size of Barrett's would play a tiny crossroads spot like Quenemo—population 750—and it is more surprising that the engagement would succeed.

"Wednesday," the *Workman* reported, "an immense crowd gathered to take in the Barrett show. Everyone was immensely pleased and Quenemo for once rivaled the capital of the state."

The pleasure of T. P. Moore might not of equaled that of the general public for the *Workman* related that he "lost \$85 in playing a gambling device and then had the parties arrested for violating the laws regarding gambling. They were discharged on account of fatal defects in the complaint and warrant."

Drunkenness, gambling and hypocrisy were all flourishing in God-fearing Kansas in 1887.

The last date for Barrett in Kansas was at Yates Center on October 13.

"Yesterday afternoon while W. H. Slavens and family were attending the show some one broke into their house and stole about \$60 worth of goods in jewelry,

rings, etc. The rings were mostly presents and keep-sakes," according to the *Sun*.

The *Woodson Democrat*, also published in Yates Center, ignored the show once it had run Barrett's ad on September 30.

The *Sun* on the day after the show, reported that, "The hotels did a good business yesterday."

"Every store in town was crowded yesterday."

"The country people turned out en masse yesterday."

"It was estimated that there were over 2,000 people in town yesterday."

"Yesterday was a glorious day for a circus."

"The circus yesterday was well attended and the people seemed to be satisfied with it. The parade was excellent, and, taken as a whole, we believe it to have been the best circus ever here."

October 13, was apparently a circus day satisfactory to all--except the Slavens family.

S. H. Barrett, "President of the Amusement Republic!," left Kansas and moved on to Nevada, Missouri.

Thirty-four towns enjoyed Barrett's New United Monster Shows and attendance was generally excellent. It seemed that if there were fifty cents anywhere in Kansas the Sells brothers wanted it. But no matter how diligent the effort, some coins were overlooked.

Research funded in part by grants from Wolfe's Camera & Video, Topeka, Kansas.

**STILL
AVAILABLE**

Annals of the American Circus

Volume II, 1830-1847

The salient history of the 155 circuses and menageries that toured America in this period. Included is the first attempt at a history of the famed Zoological Institute of 1835-1837.

This book consists of a 154 page narrative, a 205 page appendix (containing the routes, rosters and programs) and an index with over 500 names of managers, agents, bandleaders and performers. It took seven years to research and it's yours for only \$30.00 post-paid.

Stuart Thayer

430 17th Avenue East Seattle, WA 98112

CIRCUS EXPRESS

america's finest big-top tours

OKTOBERFEST 1990



A SPECTACULAR CIRCUS-TOUR EXTRAVAGANZA AMID THE GRANDEUR OF THE ALPS

October 1st to 14th

GERMANY-AUSTRIA-SWITZERLAND

This IS the Big One – When Every Day IS Circus Day!

OMNITRAVEL

*Specifically Circus,
First-Class tours; planned,
operated & conducted by
experienced travel professionals*

Call: 800-523-2366
Within MA: 617-661-3311

*For more information contact:
Bill Whitney, CFA/CHS/CMB
1218 Massachusetts Ave.
Cambridge, MA 02138*

JIM RIDENOUR

is proud to offer his home movie releases

3 RING CIRCUS

VIDEO

In VHS or BETA

\$20



5 for \$80

**ALL MY TAPES ARE GUARANTEED. BOTH CONTENT AND QUALITY
I ONLY WANT HAPPY SATISFIED CUSTOMERS.**

If this is the first ad you have seen of mine, then you are not reading *CIRCUS REPORT*, America's favorite circus weekly. It's chocked full of routes, reviews, articles on circus personalities, plus lots of ads for circus "goodies." Why not write to Don Marcks, the publisher, and ask for a sample. His address is 525 Oak St., El Centro, Ca 94530-3699. Now, to sell something. Video has arrived and 62% of American households now have VCRs. You're missing a good bet if you don't put one in your budget. Look this ad over carefully. Thanks to circus home movies & video collectors from Hawaii to Maine, I am able to offer some fantastic circus video "goodies." From famous circus personalities to controversial circuses, I have something for everyone.

From Buffalo Bill in 1893 to a review featuring over twenty circuses that toured in 1988, I offer a wide variety to please every taste. From circuses parades to mud shows, I got it all. . . And at affordable prices. . . My tapes are only twenty dollars each, post paid--or five for eighty bucks postpaid. That's commercial grade tapes. . . in cardboard sleeves at book rate postage. Have it your way . . . For high grade tapes send \$23 each, for high grade tape in plastic box and first class postage send \$27 each. . . Buy five tapes at one time and pay for only four . . . elsewhere when you buy TWO tapes from me for the same money and still have enough change for a trip to Burger King and have it Your Way. All tapes guaranteed. Pick 'em out and **ORDER NOW.**

**EUROPEAN VIDEO TAPE TRANSFER TO AMERICAN SYSTEM
& AMERICAN VIDEO TAPE TRANSFER TO EUROPEAN SYSTEM**

**LOWEST
PRICES IN USA**

JIM RIDENOUR

**TRANSFER YOUR
MOVIES TO
VIDEO CASSETTE**

P. O. Box 10343

Sarasota, FL 34278

Circus Life and Adventure of Adam Bardy



Adam Bardy's new, revised book now includes 166 pages of interesting reading, as he tells of his life with the circus and of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus tent fire during the summer of 1944, when the big top went up in flames. Adam vividly describes the very start of this devastating fire which took the lives of more than 100 people on a summer day in Hartford, Conn. on July 6, 1944.

Also included in this book is the story of Adam's years of circus life, followed by his life as a bootlegger that started in the Kentucky mountains. Adam describes the State Police raid, when he escaped and spent the next seven years as a fugitive. He tells of his "boxing days" while traveling with the Coleman Bros. carnival in the 1930s, as well as his life with the gypsies, where he learned the art of fortune telling. Many more fascinating experiences of Adam Bardy's life round out this volume.

For those that like to remember the good old days, here is a book full of interesting reading. Adam Bardy's true story of wonderful years gone by.

This nationally advertised book is now for sale at \$12.95 per copy, sent by first class mail. (For overseas orders include \$3.50 extra for air mail postage.)

To order send check or money order to:

Adam Bardy

87 Alm Rd.
Thompson, CT 06277